STREET & SMITH'S

CLUES

SEPT. '40

DETECTIVE STORIES

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Contents . .

SEPT · 1940

VICTIM for VENGEANCE

A Complete Novel featuring "Race" Williams by Carroll John Daly

TWO NOVELETTES

THE DEATH HORDE

By NED O'DOHERTY

MYSTERY of the ONE-EYED MAN

By MARK HARPER

and other stories and features



"AND TO THINK...

I might have lost you!"

"I DON'T KNOW *how I could ever have been such a fool, Betsy...such a careless, unthinking idiot...*"

"Don't say that, darling. It was partly my fault, too. I should have told you... said something. But it's such an embarrassing subject to talk about—a person's breath! I didn't know how to tell you."

"It'll never happen again, dearest. I've learned my lesson—plenty. Thank heaven Bill saw the way things were going with us. And did he give me the devil about it, too!... Told me point-blank what the trouble was, and asked me how I expected any girl to stay in love with a man who constantly offended that way."*



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CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1940 VOL. XLIV NO. 3

COMPLETE NOVEL

TWO NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

FEATURE

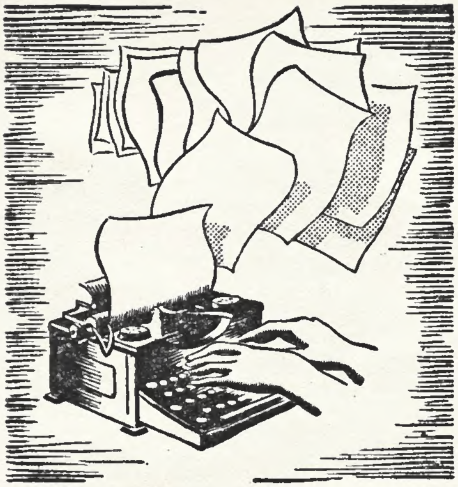
COVER BY JEROME ROZEN

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
SEPTEMBER 11th
10c per COPY
50c per YEAR

Bimonthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Treasurer and Secretary. Reentered as Second-class Matter, October 28, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada, and Countries in Pan American Union, 60c per year; elsewhere, $1.00 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in 16 the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK



THE STORY TRAIL

It seems we got ourselves into an argument because of some recent remarks made in this column. Mr. Andrew Robertson, of 279 Ithan St., Philadelphia, Pa., writes us, among other things:

"I disagree with the opening paragraph of your dissertation on silenced guns in your issue dated April in which you state that to mention them is a good way to start a discussion, and that there is a divergence of opinion.

"Your discourse was a nice little article and substantially correct, though not entirely truthful, for no arms company has any employee—any adult employee—who would have disagreed with you. My own disagreement is to your statement that anybody would argue about it.

"What you wrote on the subject is known to practically everyone of more than twelve years in the United States with the glaring exception of dick pulp writers and the editors who buy their mistakes."

Well, actually, we did have quite an argument on the relative merits of silenced firearms not only with men employed by arms companies, but also with policemen and detectives. Right in the Street & Smith organization, we had practically fist fights with several hunters and gun-association men who claimed our article was all wrong, et cetera. And we can get into the same argument with any number of writers, policemen, and gun fans any time the subject is brought up. As a test, we suggest that you try it yourself some time, and see how much difference of opinion there is on the subject.

Actually, the information we got was received personally from an individual who is considered the best authority on the subject, and whose evidence has been accepted in court dozens of times. We wish we could feel, with Mr. Robertson, that such information is no news to anyone over twelve years old, but we are sure that it isn't. If all of us would become more interested in firearms and their use by crooks as well as honest citizens, pehaps we could do more about keeping guns from crooked use.

Still, you see, this all just proves that the subject is good for an argument any time! We're susceptible, too.

But Mr. Robertson brings up another point which we think will interest all our readers. Here is the second part of his letter:

"But there is another little thing I should like to bring to your attention, and that is the cold cocking of the citizenry by your authors.

"You may have heard that in a boxing match when one contestant is belted unconscious the other man is declared winnah. This is not because the referee thinks it is im-

Continued on page 112

Mary won..

So can you!

NANTICOKE, PA.—MARY HOWELLS, NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD BLUES SINGER, WINS TWO WEEKS' ENGAGEMENT AT MICHAEL TODD'S DANCING CAMPUS AT WORLD'S FAIR.

TODAY, Mary Howells is eerning $50. a week in one of the world's greatest night clubs et the World's Feir. Yesterdey she hed never sung before en audience except in a high-school musicel et Nenticoke.

Mery won this chance for feme over meny other emateurs in the eudition et Michael Todd's Hell of Music. She enjoyed en exciting free dey at the World's Feir end todey is e guest of that tower of hospitelity—Hotel Times Square. "PIC" hes peid her return fere from Nanticoke to New York.

Over Stetion WNEW, which feetured Mery Howells on their progrem for "PIC" emeteurs, Mary told reporters, "I heve never been so thrilled as when I stepped up to the microphone—end I'm delighted at this chance for feme end big money."

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"PIC" AMATEUR CONTEST *Now!*



Victim for Vengeance

A Complete Novel

by CARROLL JOHN DALY

CHAPTER I.

WASHED UP?

I didn't like Inspector Nelson and he didn't like me. I said to him:

"Put your dirty feet on the newspaper. That's what I tossed it there for. The rugs are Persian—if it means anything to you."

"They're Persian in the lease." He grinned at me. "So you've turned yellow, Race Williams. That's a laugh."

I just smiled at him.

"If I thought you meant that, Nelson, I'd slap all your teeth down your throat." And when his face got harder—if it is true that cement hardens again every so many years—I added: "You want me to walk out and shoot a guy to death for you; or maybe you just want to try

and hang a murder rap on me." And walking forward and glaring eye to eye with him, for Nelson was a big lad, too: "Maybe you'll turn into a witness for me for self-defense. Is that why you've come to tell me about these threats? Do you expect me to pull your chestnuts out of the fire?"

Nelson shook his head. His hard gray eyes bored into mine. Then they drifted to the decanter and glasses on the tray on the table.

"I could go for a drink, Race," he said.

"That's the only way you'll get one." I stretched out a hand. "And I mean go for it—go outside for it."

Nelson slammed on his hat, jerked the brim over his forehead. He snapped out his words.

"So I give you a break by telling you things; then you want to get mussy because the law's on your side in your own home. Keep your bum liquor. A guy like you will need it. I always thought you were a dumb private dick, but I wasn't sure about your color until—"

"You can let it ride there." I slid close to him as he was about to turn. "You haven't got a warrant. No one would believe I'd invite a political plum like you into my place, and if—" He swung back. "Come on, if you want new teeth at the expense of the city."

Some day I'd clout Inspector Nelson's head in or he'd clout mine. But this wasn't the day.

The hall door opened and closed. Sergeant O'Rourke, the whitest guy on the force, walked down the hall and into the room.

The coppers who didn't like O'Rourke—and they weren't among the patrolmen, motorcycle, or plainclothes men—called him the commissioner's pet. With his rank of sergeant, he gave orders that his superior officers took, even though he did slip them out in the way of suggestions. He could have been an inspector, himself, but he didn't want that. He felt the rank of sergeant kept him nearer to the cop on the beat—the man from whom nothing is hidden in his own little world.

O'Rourke slapped Nelson on the back, gave me a pat on the shoulder.

"You boys should come down to the gym and put the gloves on." And almost off-handedly to the inspector, "McDonald wants to see you down at Centre Street. He's got some fingerprints on the truck killing."

Nelson sneered:

"I've been twenty-three years on the force and never saw nor heard of a fingerprint, picked up like that, that was good for a conviction."

"The boys have to play." O'Rourke grinned, ran a hand through his gray hair and, when Nelson had gone, helped himself to a drink. "You shouldn't ride him, Race. He hasn't any sense of humor, but he's a shrewd, steady, determined man hunter. It's more than just a job with Nelson. As a good cop, he hates all criminals."

"I'm no criminal."

"I know." O'Rourke tossed down a hooker, belched his appreciation of good liquor, and said: "He hates you on his own time, Race— It's not bad stuff, boy. Have a snifter."

I hesitated, said:

"I'm not sure."

"Ah"—O'Rourke poured himself another drink, "you never hit the liquor if something big is brewing. So you're undecided whether to go to bed or go down to the Silver Slipper Night Club and shoot a man to death?"

"Amazing, my dear O'Rourke." I wouldn't be drawn out. "I guess I'll

have the drink and go to bed. I'm not in the mood for killing tonight."

"Listen now, Race"—O'Rourke blocked my reach for the bottle—"you probably know all about it, but I'll lay it out for you, anyway. Eddie Athens is back in town. He's sporting a new moniker. They call him the Admiral. He got the name on the West coast because he started in to make a pile of jack shaking down the gambling ships. Now, they aren't around any more to be shaken down. He did plenty of dirty stuff out that way, and the boys don't like him; so he came back East. You remember Eddie Athens?"

"Sure," I nodded pleasantly. Eddie and I had had it out nearly two years back. He had told me that the city of New York wasn't big enough for both of us. He made three attempts at my life in three days, then found himself in the hospital for seven months with high-paid specialists picking lead out of him. He had been right. The city wasn't big enough for both of us. He left.

When O'Rourke waited for me to say something, I said:

"I remember him. You tell me."

"Of course." O'Rourke got it off his chest as if he had figured it out, himself, and not as if half of the underworld had talked about it. "I only know what I hear, but they said you chased him out of the city. Now he's back. But the run-out you gave him has lingered in the memory of criminals great and small, and they didn't want any part of the Admiral. *Didn't,* I said; not *don't.* They are listening to him, now. And why? Because in the last few nights he's been hitting all the high spots, threatening you and telling politicians and everyone that you don't dare face him. Maybe not exactly an open threat of violence, but some think you're afraid to face him. Others—well, they think worse—that Eddie, the Admiral, has something crooked on you."

I took a laugh.

"You wouldn't believe that guff—any of it."

"It's not what I believe." O'Rourke shook his head. "But every criminal and every crooked politician can easily believe it. Why not? They think well of themselves and can't remember the day when no one had anything on them. So Eddie's building himself up by his derision of you, and they can all see that you're doing nothing to stop it. It isn't like you, boy. Everybody on the Stem knows your record. You had—*had,* understand—a reputation for plugging the mouth of anyone who made threats against you. That *was* your big asset as a private detective. Big crooks don't fear the police because they can hire high-class criminal lawyers. But"—he paused and licked at his lips—"no crook can climb out of a hole in the cemetery and get himself a mouthpiece."

"Why speak of me in the past tense?" I refused to get mad.

"Oh, I know you're not afraid of him, Race, but I'm thinking of you, boy. Nelson was just hoping you'd drive him out of town again or—"

"Plant him here?"

"That's right. Eddie Athens is too clever to lay a finger on. There is something big stirring; and, if he can get back the confidence of big crooked money, he'll handle it. Besides, Race, it's not entirely business with him. Do you remember Frankie Collins? You know, the big life-insurance-murder scandal.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I remember. I sent him to the chair."

O'Rourke said solemnly:

"That was over a year and a half ago. He fought the case up and down the courts. He burns tomorrow night."

"That's right," I agreed.

"Well"—O'Rourke put steady eyes on me—"it's more than a rumor that Eddie Athens was deep into that insurance racket and took well over a hundred-thousand-dollar loss on the deal. That puts something personal in it." And when I still refused to get excited: "There's more to it, too, Race. I think he actually means these threats. He's desperate for money and power. He had just got his racket working on the West coast when the law chased the gambling ships off the seas. The racketeers out there hate his guts. He's got to build up his reputation here—get big shots in with him—or some of those lads will come East and blow him apart. And he's building up that power; building up a new and great danger to the city. He's building it up by trampling you down! Why don't you do something about it? He's got brains."

"I've got brains, too." I took a smile. "Eddie Athens knows me. Why should he lay himself open to get himself killed? The answer is that someone has fooled him. Someone is trying to get me mixed up in a mess so I won't be able to handle a big case that's coming my way. And Nelson wants me to pull his official chestnuts out of the fire—even before they are fully roasted. I'm changing a bit. I'm using my head, now."

O'Rourke's laugh grated.

"Don't kid yourself, Race. That head of yours is to hang a hat on—nothing more. Eddie's no cheap murderer. He means what he says. Did you see Fletcher's column today?"

I started to say, "No," when O'Rourke jerked the newspaper out of his pocket and slapped it in my hand—folded neatly to the right spot. I read where it was blue-penciled.

—It may be news to a certain private detective, whom this column has always upheld even in his most violent methods of subduing crime, that the majority of opinions in the night spots mark him as washed up. We don't agree, but we must admit that we don't know how to argue in his favor, either. But we like to believe that it's a big case that keeps him busy and not the jitters. It is inconceivable to your reporter that this well-known private investigator, who has been pretty rough in dishing it out, can't take it when the time arrives. Oh, hum, we'll stick to our guns even if he doesn't stick to his and bet a very small bet that when he gets over his sulks he'll take a certain criminal apart and see what makes him tick—

But that was all I read, and it was enough. Sure—things were under my skin, now. My reputation was becoming public property.

O'Rourke looked at my face and said:

"The Admiral is down at the Silver Slipper. Good night, Race."

And he left me there with the newspaper still clutched in my hand.

CHAPTER II.

MEET THE ADMIRAL.

The Silver Slipper was doing a good business. Yet, Charlie Thompkins, the owner, spotted me as soon as I hit the place. His jolly laugh and booming, friendly voice were all there when he greeted me. But he smiled only with his mouth; his eyes had a worried look as he tried to make his words nonchalant.

"How ya, boy? How ya?" Wrinkles rolled down from his bald forehead and settled over his worried eyes. "Not business, I hope. Just pleasure, eh?"

His mouth laughed again, and his eyes studied me.

"Pleasure it is," I told him as I started toward the main room. He grabbed at my arm.

"Listen, boy, listen. I hate to do myself out of any business, but confidentially—not a word, understand—my best talent is up Harlem way. Actors' benefit, you know. Here, I've got a couple of tickets for it. You can just catch the midnight show." He hunted through his low-cut vest. "I know how particular you are. We've got a bum floor show here tonight."

"Never mind, Charlie," I nodded as I stepped past him. "I'll put on a floor show for you that will knock your eye out."

"Come, boy, come. I—"

I was gone—straight down that room to the big table right on the edge of the open dance floor. They saw me coming, one by one. First the stalwart, well-preserved, white-haired Ralph Fittsgibbons, big political boss. He nudged the man beside him who was thickset, squat and with a collar up around his chin, since he didn't have any neck. He turned slowly, both his elbows on the table as he looked at me. Nothing showed on his thick-skinned, weather-beaten face. Beady eyes took me in appraisingly. Today he was Michael Fairchild Stein. I knew him when he was called Flat-faced Mike. Both these men had influence; both had money, and both knew where to get more.

There were two other men at that table. Harry Jackson was one. He was big; he was strong. He was considered reliable and had been bodyguard for some big racketeers up and down the Stem. A few years back he had beaten the rap in the Vanort-Mason murder down Florida way.

The fourth man was the one I was looking for. And if he told the truth, which I doubted, he was looking for me, too. He wore his soup and fish as if he were born in it. You wouldn't take him for a waiter. He was slouched in a chair with the side of his face toward me. Like Harry Jackson, he had a big cigar in his mouth; but, unlike Jackson, he wasn't using it as a simple decoration. He'd put it in and out of his mouth, roll it around in his fingers, and enjoy the smoke. This man was Eddie Athens, the Admiral—and my meat!

There had been a fifth party. A woman who had pulled a chair up with its back to the table, and with one knee on it was joshing with the men. She was Cathleen Conners, of course. Cathleen had come up the hard way. She wasn't young any more, but she was setting Charlie Thompkins back a couple of grand for her little singing act. What did she have that younger women didn't have? She had beauty; she had the figure; she had legs. But above all, she had talent. Charlie Thompkins got his money back double, or she wouldn't have been working there.

I said there *had* been a fifth party. And I was right. Cathleen had been along Broadway since she was eighteen. She hadn't much to learn. Her head raised as I came into the room; gorgeous brown globes settled on my face for a single second. She wasn't any Arab; but if she had a tent, it was folded and she was gone.

Fittsgibbons and Stein turned slightly and watched me come down that room between the tables. But they didn't tip Harry Jackson or the Admiral off. Maybe they thought I wouldn't like it. Harry and the Admiral were both watching the de-

parting figure of Cathleen when I reached that table.

I grabbed the Admiral's chair, swung it around, and stood looking down at him. He had a face that was sharp and cruel, and lips so thin that they weren't more than a couple of strips of red below and above his mouth—a mouth that even in repose didn't hide the whiteness of straight, even teeth. And his eyes. Despite what people tell you, this lad's eyes were black—a hard, polished sort of ebony. If it wasn't that he sported a tiny mustache, you'd take him for the handsome villain of an old-time melodrama. He was a man who would strike fear into you as soon as you looked at him. Understand, I said fear into you—not into me.

Those black eyes set on mine. He half-waved the cigar in his hand toward Harry, who had turned now and was facing me. Then he stuck the cigar in his mouth and looked up at me. He said:

"Don't bother, Harry. I'll handle this."

At that I leaned forward, stretched out my hand, and pulling the cigar out of his mouth, reversed it quickly and slapped the lighted end of it back into his mouth again! After that I spoke fast, acted fast. I jerked loose his bow tie and, slipping the front of it above his collar, twisted it about his neck.

"I've been hearing what a bad man you are," I told him as he spit fire like a cheap performer at a county fair. "Stand up when you speak to me!" And, twisting the tie more, I jerked him to his feet. He spluttered smoke, live ashes and high-priced Havana tobacco. "Stop kidding the boys along that you're tough. I mightn't like it, and next time I'll let you do your fire-eating tricks with short steel-jacketed cigars."

Pain and anger and madness were all in his face, but I wasn't any too good-natured either. He said:

"I'll kill you for this, Williams. I'll kill you for this!"

I took a laugh, saw that too many people were in on the show and dropped him back in the chair with the heel of my hand against his chin. And I mean against his chin!

"There's no time like the present, Big Chief Smoke Eater," I told him. And when he just sat there gulping the water that helpful Harry held to his mouth, I turned to the other men.

"Fitssgibbons and"—I let the Flat-face go—"Stein. Fine bums you hang out with." Spotting three waiters and one bouncer just behind, I turned and added: "Well, you got something you want to show?" I ran a hand up under my armpit and stroked my chin.

Those lads faded as if they were in a marionette show and invisible wires had pulled them back. Helpful Harry was patting the Admiral on the back. Me—I had done my duty. I walked right down to the little table at the end of the dance floor. The single table, and the chair across from the man who sat at that table. The chair that was forbidden to all but the favorite few who were invited to sit down. It was the private table of New York's greatest columnist and America's greatest he-gossip—Fletcher.

Fletcher didn't go in for cigars, but I got a smile out of the way he dunked out his cigarette in the coffee cup, hesitated a moment, then dropped it on the floor. He spoke quickly—loudly enough for the hovering waiters to hear when I neared him:

"Sit down, Mr. Williams. Sit down, Race. It isn't often I have the opportunity to have such a guest. I think I'll pay for your drink." He picked up his milk and sipped it, watching me over it with his thick-rimmed glasses hardly hiding the brilliancy of his great brown eyes.

You think perhaps that there should have been some excitement because of my little by-play with the Admiral? None at all. The regulars saw little in the incident other than a petty misunderstanding or a row which might take place a dozen times a night. Outsiders—they liked it. It was to them a part of New York's night life. But at that, the little altercation could be figured only in seconds—minutes, perhaps, if you're a stickler for accuracy.

I sat down and said:

"Well, what do you think, Fletcher?"

Fletcher pulled out a cigarette, stuck it into his mouth, started to strike a match, then tossed the match back on the tray. He smiled —all right, but not so good. At length he said:

"To be perfectly honest with you, Williams, I can't think of a man I'd be less pleased about being threatened by than you."

"I never threaten," I told him. "I act!"

"That," he said, "is taken from my column. May I smoke?"

I grinned, said:

"Go ahead." Fletcher had never done anything to me except for those cracks in the paper tonight. In fact, when the commissioner and the district attorney were riding me for some bit of shooting, he often came out in his column and gave me a boost. Fletcher finally lit his butt, said:

"Have a drink?"

"Maybe." I shrugged my shoulders. "I never drink when I have business, but I guess I settled my business for tonight." And as Fletcher beckoned a waiter who was hovering not too far away with an eye like an eagle, I said: "I could go for a little straight rye. I never want it said that any of my actions came through the neck of a bottle. When things are toughest, I drink Vichy."

"Very well," he grinned at me. It was a sickly grin and the face he turned to the waiter was a greenish-white. But his voice was clear enough when he spoke to the waiter. "A glass of Vichy—a small glass—for Mr. Williams."

I didn't argue. I just turned my head and looked. Eddie Athens was walking slowly toward our table. And he was alone. Now, what was on his mind? He had said something about killing me a few minutes before. Now—I just shrugged my shoulders, lifted the napkin quickly, and shoved a gun under it.

Ridiculous to shoot a man to death in a night club? Sure—I'll agree to that. But it has been done. Ridiculous or not, it wouldn't do me much good if I were dead. So I left the gun beneath the napkin and continued my talk with Fletcher, while out of the corner of my eye I watched the slowly approaching Admiral and his hands—his white empty hands that swung at his sides.

"Trouble, Race," Fletcher whispered without moving his lips. "The Admiral."

I turned now and looked at the Admiral as he leaned on the back of an empty chair. There was no anger in his black eyes—no sardonic curve to the thin gash that was his mouth. He said simply:

"You are a remarkable man, Mr. Williams. But I am of a forgiving nature. Because of the people who were with me and the good name of the house, I will treat the matter as a joke. May I sit down? And may I caution you not to wipe your mouth with that napkin? It might explode in your face."

I said:

"You've got good eyes and evidently a tough mouth. Oh, I don't mean for words; I mean for chewing lighted cigars. No, you can't sit down."

"Really?" He pulled back the chair and dropped easily into it. "You see, if I didn't deem it advisable to handle you roughly at the other table, you could scarcely shoot me to death here. Let me assure you, Mr. Williams, if your little display of bad manners had happened at another place, you would not be so fortunate."

He was smooth, polished. You'd think I had swallowed the cigar. But a look down the room showed me his political pals and racketeer friends had left. I took the cigarette Fletcher offered me. I took the light, too, blew a couple of rings, and said:

"I haven't got your manners, and any place suits me. If you want to return the compliment and shove this butt down my throat, go ahead and see what happens to you."

A little tough, that? Perhaps. But then I'm a little tough and willing to admit it. Here, this guy had shot his mouth all along the Stem about what he'd do to me, and, now, he was trying to impress on the customers that it was simply a joke. He threw back his head and laughed. It was an annoying laugh because it seemed free and easy and not forced.

"On the level, my dear Williams," he said, and the "my dear" got under my skin and burned me up. Was it the way he said it? I guess so. Don't ask me why. I don't know. But his next words were worse. "I didn't know there were such characters left in New York. You remind me so much of the rats that come in on boats from the Orient."

I half came to my feet and then sat down again. A good fighter in the prize ring never loses his head or his temper. A good lad in my business never loses his temper, or he's apt to lose his head. Yet, I'll admit that the Admiral had my goat. I guess he read it in my face—in my eyes. And me, I could see nothing but his gleaming white teeth. And I had one thought only—to make all those white teeth disappear somewhere, preferably far back in the Admiral's mouth.

I'll admit it. I was mad. Damn good and mad! Here he was smiling and talking and undoing the nice impression I had made at his table. Perhaps he'd even say later that he was telling me off. It took a lot of control on my part. He seemed to enjoy my anger. Then I said:

"Admiral, I'm particular—and not like those rats you palled around with from the Orient. So get up and leave the table or—"

"Or?" He parted his face and let the row of ivory keys show.

"Or"—I leaned slightly forward—"I'll blow a hole in your face that will positively amaze Fletcher!"

The Admiral's eyes widened in amused speculation. He waved an empty white hand around at the crowded room.

"Here in the dining room?"

"Here in the dining room!"

"How quaint," was all he said, but he didn't move.

I wasn't mad any more, but I pretended to be. I just clapped my right hand on the napkin and said:

"You have ten seconds to be on your way." Then I started counting. "One, two, three, four—"

The Admiral started to speak, heard me hit eight and almost knocked his chair over backward. Then he was on his way.

I liked it. I laughed. I leaned back in the chair and took a belly laugh.

"There's one for your column," I told Fletcher.

Fletcher didn't laugh.

"I'll publish it Friday if you're still alive. Listen, Race." He was very serious, now. "It was a glorious bluff, of course, but the Admiral didn't know that." He hesitated. "Even I didn't know it. But remember this. I hear things around. Your actions tonight may have taken a million dollars—yes, a full million dollars—right out of the Admiral's pocket. And that money surely stays out of his pocket if you stay alive. Don't grin. You won't always be facing him. And you'll be just as dead if the bullet goes through the back of your head as the Admiral would be if you put it through the front of his."

"Don't spoil a lad's fun." I leaned across the table and poked Fletcher in the ribs. Then with a broader grin: "Maybe you'd suggest that I'd better shoot him to death after all."

"Yes!" Fletcher didn't grin. "I'd suggest just that."

It was then that the waiter came and said Miss Cathleen Conners would like to speak to me in her dressing room.

CHAPTER III.

THE CLIENT.

Cathleen Conners didn't look so young, when I was close to her there in her dressing room. And Cathleen Conners wasn't the assured woman of the world she had always been. There was plenty on her mind, and her laugh was shrill when I asked her about it.

"Nothing, really, Race, nothing that should bother me." And when I just looked at her she put both hands on my shoulders. "Maybe we never knew each other very well, Race, but you've known me a long time."

"Yes," I nodded at that one, "I remember you when—"

"It's all right," she went on when I paused. "When you were a boy and I was in vaudeville. It's true enough. I am older than people think."

"You can't be that old." I tried to laugh it off, but the answering smile I got was sort of ghastly. She couldn't seem to speak; so I tried to make it easy for her.

"Listen," I asked, "did you send me that thousand dollars with the instructions that I was to be in my apartment every night until I got a call that would pay me a lot of money?"

She hesitated a long time and then said:

"Yes—I did." I let her bite her lip. After all, it was her story and her explanation, and at last it came.

"A great many years ago," she said, "when I was first in the show business, I had a roommate who married a young playboy. But his father cut off his money after the marriage, and he didn't play any more. In fact, she straightened him out so well that when his father died, ten years later, he left them quite a fortune. My girl friend died, leaving a very beautiful daughter." She paused then, dabbed slightly at her eyes with a bit of fancy rag. "Oh, Race—that girl has been kidnaped. They'll kill her!"

"Head up, kid." I chucked at her

chin. "There's no money in a dead girl. Tell me all about it."

She went to it rapidly, then, in a mechanical sort of way. The girl had been out for a walk in Central Park. It was almost dinner time, and she had not returned home. Before her father became really worried, he received a telephone call. Just a voice on the wire told him that if he breathed a word of it to the police, he would never see his daughter alive again. He immediately got in touch with her—with Cathleen Conners.

"I know a lot of people—and a lot of life," she hurried on. "I suggested you as a contact man. But there was a question if these people would accept you. We were afraid you might be called out of town. So to be sure you'd be around we sent you that retainer. Then the girl's father was telephoned again and was told that if he ever spoke to you about it, the girl would die. There was nothing for me to do then—nothing." A long pause, and finally: "Tonight, when I saw you here, I had to tell you—*had* to tell you! He isn't capable of handling things alone."

"I'll bet he isn't. What's his name?"

She reddened slightly, and I'm going to tell you that that was something for Cathleen Conners.

"I can't tell you that." And when I just stared at her: "Can't you see? Don't you understand? He's been warned against using you."

I didn't understand; so I said:

"Then why bother with me tonight?"

"Because, when I saw you come in—when I saw the way you handled the Admiral—everything I knew and had heard about you swept back. I had to tell you. I had to have help, Race. God help me, I have found a man who knows where the girl is held captive. The girl's father will pay you ten thousand dollars for her safe return. This man who is mixed up with the kidnaping is willing to take me to the house where the girl is. He promised to free her. He doesn't like a kidnaping rap; he's afraid. In return, I will give him protection from the police and—"

"Yes?" I helped her a bit.

"And I am to give him an alibi for his confederates if he should be suspected. The alibi is that he could not have had anything to do with her escape since he was with me in my . . . my apartment. I'll swear to that. I am afraid to bring the police into it because they might kill the girl, then. And I'm afraid to go with him without protection for he might—I'm thinking of the girl before myself, but he might kill me."

"You bet he might," I told her. "But how did you find out who knew where the girl was?" And suddenly snapping my fingers: "I've got it, the Admiral. Listen. You sent me a note with a thousand dollars in it. I was to stay at my apartment nights and wait for a call. Then the father of the kidnaped girl told the kidnapers on the phone that he had sent me a note." She nodded. "So you and the girl's father and the kidnapers were the only ones who knew about that note. Right after that, the Admiral started talking about fixing me if he met me. He knew I'd be home by the phone, and he could shoot his mouth off. It fits—but how did you find it out?"

"It doesn't fit, Race." She shook her head. "But that is how I found out. I have known Eddie Athens, the Admiral, for a long time. He helped me to locate this man, but

he didn't mean to. I gave my word to tell his name to no one. Let us call him John Smith, then. I meet all kinds of people. The moment the girl disappeared, I put my ear to the ground. I have heard a lot in my time and learned to forget it. I won't go into what people tell me or from whom I might have received a hint. But"—she went over and looked in the closet, then came back —"but as you say, it fits that the Admiral started to threaten you after you had received that note. He was in this very club when he first made his threat, and this John Smith was sitting at the table when he made it. You see, John Smith had told him that you were tied up and wouldn't be leaving your apartment for several days."

"But you can't be sure it was John Smith who told him."

"I can be sure. I am sure! I know people, and I know their friends. The Admiral hardly knew John Smith. But I invited John Smith here to my dressing room. He was flattered and pleased. That is, he was until I pointed a gun at him and told him he must tell me where the girl was or I would turn him over to the police."

I looked at Cathleen Conners, nodded my approval. As I said, she came up the hard way and knew her way about.

"It was then," she said, "that he made the deal with me. John Smith never was a big man in the criminal world. He was willing to play along with me if I would protect him. He wanted an out—nothing else. He was badly frightened."

"But Cathleen—" I started, and she stopped me.

"You know me, Race. Broadway has known me for a long time, and knows that I'm a straight shooter. Since I saw you tonight, I phoned the girl's father. You will be paid ten thousand dollars for the safe return of the girl. I can't tell you any more. I won't tell you any more. I think John Smith is absolutely on the level with me, but I want to be sure. For the girl's sake, too. You're the only man I'd trust. If you won't go with me, I'll go alone." She tried to smile, but it was not a very good one. "Ten thousand dollars and no questions asked."

Well, what would you say? The same as I said. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money. Of course I'd go.

Cathleen Conners did talk more. But no more about the identity of the father or the girl or of John Smith. She didn't want advice from me; so I didn't offer any. I put it down to cold business. Her arrangements with John Smith were O. K.—according to whether John Smith preferred to double-cross his friends without them knowing it and save himself from a long prison term, or whether he might decide to kidnap two women instead of one. Or murder one—that one, of course, being Cathleen Conners. Frankly, if John Smith were small-time stuff, as Cathleen had hinted, he'd think only of his skin. Murder is not for small timers. Greed gives way to fear when the smell of burning flesh in the electric chair is easily imagined.

Cathleen was to take her car, drive over to the corner of Eightieth Street and Riverside Drive at six thirty the next evening and pick up John Smith. He would then show her where to drive, even aid her in getting the girl free and, I presume, leave the blame to fall on some lad "sleeping" in another part of the house. Nice boy John Smith.

So I arranged to meet her on a

side street, two blocks down from the Silver Slipper, a little before half past six.

She got her call then to go out and do her famous, "Won't You Be My Pretty Daddy?" song and act, which she did just once a night. She told me to wait in her dressing room until she had gone, so we wouldn't be seen talking together. I gave her a start, then left. But I did stop at the heavy curtains which led from the dressing rooms to the floor and, with five or six half-dressed young things, peeked through at Cathleen Conners.

She was a great trouper, all right. If she was frightened, she didn't show it. Her heart, her body, her whole spirit seemed to be in that damn-fool song. But that song kept her in the spotlight that she was in now. She was famous for it all over the city. She was not only a good singer and dancer, she was a good actress, too.

I watched her for a bit, there in the darkened room, a spotlight on her, another that chased around the room and lit on different male guests. She danced around the one that the spot was on, then turned her back and suddenly swung around to him, patting his cheeks and ruffling his hair while she sang, "Won't You Be My Pretty Daddy?" Some of the gents were embarrassed, but a lot of lads even used to tip the man on the spot, beforehand, to shine it on them.

But it was a catchy tune. I was whistling it when I slipped out of the Silver Slipper.

CHAPTER IV.
END OF THE RIDE.

Cathleen Conners was right. She shouldn't go with John Smith alone, especially when someone would pay that much money for the return of the snatched girl. She hadn't told me everything. She made no bones about saying that she wouldn't tell me. A great deal of what she said was hard to swallow, but the thought of ten thousand dollars finally forced it down. I didn't try to figure it out. She probably had a good reason for not telling me the entire truth. Just one thing was certain. She was afraid of walking into a trap. Me—I like traps. A guy learns things from them.

So I was on the side street, two blocks down from the Silver Slipper, at six fifteen next evening. Cathleen came in a long, high-priced but '36 model black sedan. She seemed nervous—almost at the breaking point; so I tried to cheer her a bit.

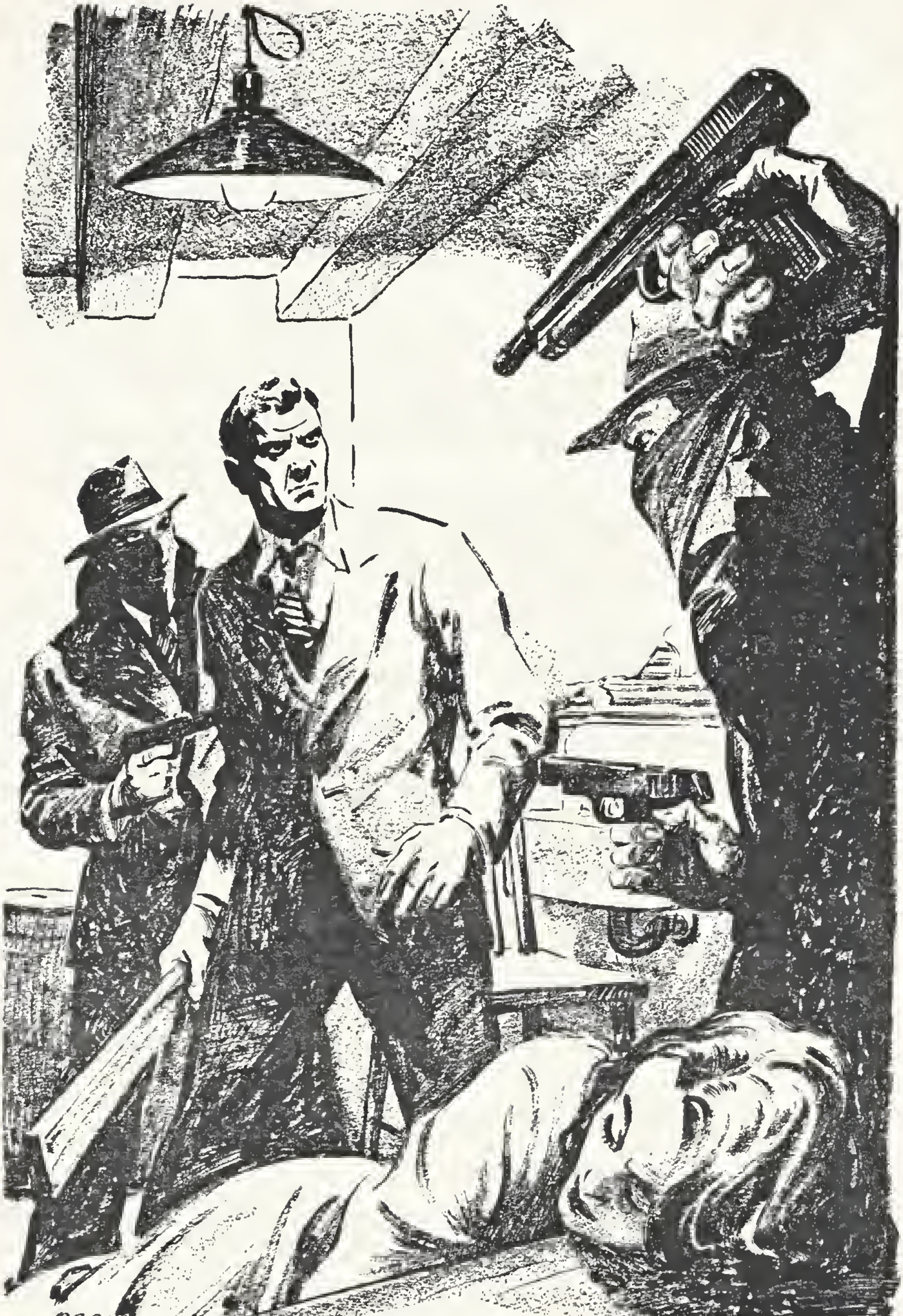
"With the money you're making you should be ashamed of yourself driving anything but an up-to-date model," I chided her. "Now, you don't have to tell me anything more, but let me know your ideas and see if I can improve on them."

"I didn't want you to bring your car and follow me, because I was afraid he might watch."

"He would," I told her. "On the level with you or not on the level with you, he'd watch and lose me in the traffic. It's possible I could stick a gun in his side and make him go to the house and—"

"No, no!" She stepped from the car and clutched me by the arm. "I put a rug in the back seat that you could lie under, and then bob up when he had brought me to the house."

"Even if he had no suspicion of you, he would look in the back of the car. Anyone would." I hesitated and then: "You have a good-sized trunk carrier?"



"You think you're a hero, Williams," the Admiral said. The girl half lay on the step at his feet.

"Trunk carrier?" she gasped. "Yes, but I don't know if—"

But I was around back of the car looking at her trunk carrier. We talked for a few minutes more—at least, she did. I wasn't listening much. Then I said:

"I could fit in it comfortably. Well, not comfortably, but I could fit in it."

"I don't know." She was sort of shaking her head. "Wouldn't he look in it?"

"I don't think so. I think he'll hop right in the car when you drive up. But if he does look in the carrier, there will be nothing for me to do but stick a gun in his face and try to scare him into going through with taking us both to the girl."

I would have preferred to use the gun act on John Smith, but I had a good reason for not chancing it. Suppose he wasn't on the up and up with Cathleen and had a couple of gunmen watching when she picked him up? They'd see me put the gun on him; and, where I'm not averse to a little gun play, it wouldn't be so good for Cathleen and the imprisoned girl.

"I didn't think of the trunk carrier." Cathleen shook her head. "It's full of odds and ends."

"Easy enough." I lifted up the top of the carrier as Cathleen joined me in the street and tossed the odds and ends onto the floor of the car. A dirty blanket, a half-box of dog biscuits, one silk stocking, a shoe box and an empty purse.

Some people were passing as I shook my head over the size of the carrier. Not that it wasn't extra large, but then I'm extra large, myself. Of course, you could have gotten two men in there if you had taken them apart and distributed them carefully. But who wants to be taken apart? I tried the catches on the carrier. They were worn and rusty, and it would take some manipulation to lock them.

"They don't work very well," she told me. "I don't try to lock it any more."

"I don't want them to work well." I gave her real instructions. "You're to stay behind the wheel when this John Smith gets in. If he so much as comes around back to look at the trunk carrier, blow your horn; then I'll bounce out. Don't drive into any private garage under a house. Stay out on the street. Once he has you stop the car, I'll have a gun poking out and be ready—I mean when he reaches his destination. There seems to be plenty of ventilation." I tried to stick my little finger through the holes on either end; but the holes, though numerous, were too small.

Cathleen and I looked up and down the street, waited for a man to pass, then a woman. Another quick look-see, and I hopped into the trunk carrier and chucked a few loose screws out in the gutter. Things looked better. I had thought at first that the worn old carrier would fall apart. It had looked about ready to. But it held my weight, and I finally squirmed myself into it.

No matter how I worked it, I had to lie on my side. Cathleen had to help me get the top down. It didn't fit very well, but she couldn't close it any farther; so I let it go at that. If the lad she met was suspicious or had a curious turn of mind, why I'd simply poke a gun in his face when he opened the top of the carrier and start from there.

Bum job that carrier, too, considering the original price of the car. The ventilating holes were too small to distinguish anything when

we crossed Broadway, even if I could have twisted my head to look out. Then I had something more important to think about. That carrier may have been lined with old beaver board and tar paper, but somewhere a bit of sharp tin had gotten into the mess. And what's more, it was getting into my neck. Sharp? It was like a razor blade, and I had to hold my head cocked up and resting on nothing. Then a swerve, and the tin or steel or what-have-you got me.

I went after it with my left hand, finally turned into a contortionist and got my fingers on it. Sure, I knew when I found it. The blood came. But I had luck there. It twisted free in my hand. Not much size to it, but it would have been a deadly weapon to cut a man's throat with; dull on one side and sharp on the other.

A little cramped? Sure—but I couldn't expect all the comforts of home at a little over a hundred dollars a minute. That thought was not unpleasant.

I straightened, stiffened, held my gun tightly. We must have reached Eightieth Street and Riverside Drive. The car was coming to a stop.

The car stopped. I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear a voice say, from somewhere up near the front of the car:

"If you ever breathe a word of this, Cathleen, I'm a dead—"

Then there were two sudden bangs as if hammers rang on steel, and that steel was inside my head! I react quickly to any emergency, and this was a real one. I banged up against the top of that carrier, and I banged right back again. I knew then. Two blows had come together: One against the side of the carrier, one against the top—and the bolts had been snapped home!

I shot out with my feet to kick the damned thing apart, and the whole thing struck me at once. That carrier was lined with new steel; old beaver board had been put inside of it. I had been taken in like a child. Walked into a trap! Walked into it? Hell, I had climbed into it; I even laid down in it.

And the woman, Cathleen Conners? Had she known; or was she, too, taken by surprise? As the car jumped from the curb I knew the answer to that one. She had brought the car around for me. The slamming and bolting of that top had been a well-prepared—yes, and a well-rehearsed job. It wasn't her car, but one they told her to drive. Who were they? I didn't know, but I could make a pretty good guess at one of them. And I didn't like that guess.

Like a child—that was it. She had even let the suggestion that I hide in the carrier come from me. Her talk about being under the rug. The odds and ends as if she hadn't expected me to get in there.

Trapped! Trapped! Trapped! And then my head began to work again. That is as much as that head of mine ever works. I wormed my way around, got my gun close to one of the tiny holes, and had hard work holding it there as the car swayed. I tightened my finger on the trigger.

A surprise for the people of New York. A surprise for the cops, too, if they saw a car spouting gunfire. I might crash a few windows along the route. I might—

And I didn't press the trigger. The concussion, itself, would be bad enough to deafen me, but the powder would poison me—at best put me out of action. You know, gunners in the turrets of battleships wear

gas masks. If they don't—*bingo*—they go out and stay out. No, I didn't fire.

Out of action. That was a hot one. What action was I in?

Traps! All my life I watch for them; prepare for them. I thought of all the trouble I have caused myself in doubting the intentions of honest clients, of all the traps I had looked for and would be glad to go in with a gun in each hand. I had said that traps are interesting. Well, this one wasn't. At least not for me.

What to do? Nothing! Nothing right then. But when that carrier was opened, they'd find it bursting lead from two guns. I had thoughts then that maybe it never would be opened. Had thoughts of the car being abandoned, shoved into gear and let shoot off a dock into the river!

I tried to kick the sides out of the carrier. I don't know how it sounded outside the car, but inside it was bad—bad in more ways than one.

Did I curse out the woman Cathleen? I suppose so, but I didn't try to figure out why she did it. What jam was she in that made her do it? I could only figure my jam. After awhile I just lay there and waited.

The car slowed, veered hard to the right, bumped a bit, crawled slowly and jarred to a stop. For no reason at all I raised particular hell with my feet, then. Surely the sound was heard. But by whom was the question. Then I stopped and listened.

Doors closed heavily, scraping across cement. Scared? Terror-stricken? No—I was mad. Damn good and mad!

There was a bright light, now, as I nearly broke my neck and peered through the tiny holes. Heavy feet sounded and a man spoke.

"Something in the box, eh? Something from the darkest Africa? Walks, talks, and is it alive?" A laugh then, and I knew the man. Cathleen Conners had certainly taken me in nicely.

The man was the Admiral!

He went on after a couple of other laughs, greeting what he thought was the height of wit.

"It's either some dumb creature—some very dumb creature—or Race Williams, himself, the great detective. Locks himself up in a box and delivers himself like a birthday present to me."

"Will I toss him a fish?" And this voice I thought I knew, too. It sounded like Jackson, the big heel who was at the night spot with the Admiral. But the next voice I didn't know, and I can't say that I was stuck on his advice. But it was almost as if he had stolen it from one of my thoughts.

"If I were you, Admiral, I'd let him go off the dock with the car. He can't be dead too soon."

"Yes he can," said the Admiral, and there was no laugh in his voice, now. "I have waited for this, planned it, and that's the way it's going to be—eleven o'clock tonight, exactly."

Perhaps my heart did beat a bit better. Close to four and a half more hours of life. A lot can happen in that time. Another thought of mine stolen. Jackson was telling the Admiral the same thing. Then the other man said:

"How are you going to get him out of the carrier?"

I set my lips grimly. I hadn't said anything; I hadn't made a sound since my first few kicks. I hoped they'd think I was unconscious and open the cover; then I'd blast away!

But the Admiral's next words weren't so good.

"Give me the ether!" he said. And a moment later: "Hold that handkerchief to my nose, Jackson. I'll just spray it in like disinfectant, and we'll have at least one unconscious cockroach."

I had a sudden flash—an idea—and I went to work on it. I tried to hold my breath and work the idea at the same time. I knew Admiral Eddie Athens would be sure to give me enough ether. I knew I was going to pass out, but I wanted to be sure that I only passed out and didn't die.

"I can hear him squirming around in there," the Admiral said in a thick voice that must have come from behind the handkerchief.

And he was right. I was squirming. The ether was beginning to get me. I tried to turn around to get my breath from the holes at the other end of the carrier, but couldn't make it. The deadly fumes of the ether were creeping over me!

Maybe I was fighting off death to die a worse one. I couldn't know what was in store for me. Then the pounding came into my ears. I ducked low with my head on my arms to breathe, but the thing got me just the same. But why eleven o'clock tonight?

What was eleven o'clock tonight—What . . . what— Yeah—sure . . . eleven o'clock . . . tonight— I gasped for breath. I wanted to laugh. I knew—

At eleven o'clock . . . they were frying the Admiral's friend . . . former partner, Frankie Collins . . . to death up at Sing Sing prison. Yeah . . . frying . . . sure . . . frying his old friend . . . to death . . . his friend, Collins, that I sent to . . . to . . . frying him—

After that—real blackness!

CHAPTER V.

"YOU'RE GOING TO BURN!"

There was a bad taste in my mouth, and I felt as if I had been laid out on a morgue slab. Or maybe it was just a hospital table. There was a dull light in the room and faces watching me. All sorts of faces: doctors, it seemed; then a rather sweet young face. A nurse. She must have lifted up my head, then said:

"Drink this."

Things were coming back to me slowly. All this was the effect of the ether. I was coming out of it, and had crazy ideas. Of course, I couldn't be in a hospital, or a morgue, either, and be alive. That was too pleasant an idea. But I did open my mouth, and I did—

The water was good, and it was real. I sat up. It was a real girl, and she said:

"Drink some more."

I blinked, drank some more, opened my eyes wider and took in things—at least, fairly well.

A low-ceilinged room with great beams running across the top of it. A hard cement floor and cement walls. A couple of blankets on the floor, two old kitchen chairs, a sink, a wooden flight of stairs leading some place above, and not a window. And, of course, the girl.

I got to one knee, staggered to my feet, swayed, tacked over to the wall, steadied myself a bit and made the sink. The girl helped me, I think, but the cold water over my head helped me more.

"What did they do to you?" the girl asked. "You're Race Williams. I have often read about you. You're an—"

"I'm an idiot!" I straightened from the sink, now, took the glass

from her hand and filled it twice at the tap. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dorothy Nester," she said. "It doesn't matter, Mr. Williams. You came to save me. They told me that. They opened the trapdoor above, threw you down the steps and said: 'It's Race Williams—come to save you.' Then they laughed."

Nice introduction, wasn't it? I stood and stared at her. Young, small, slender, with wondering, childlike blue eyes, but a determined little mouth and chin. I put my hand in my pocket for a comb, then brushed my wet hair back with my hand.

"They didn't think I'd come to so soon," I said rather stupidly. I felt for a couple of guns that weren't there. Then I ran over to the stairs, climbed up and put my shoulder against the trapdoor at the top. It was thick wood and didn't give an inch. The girl watched me. As I missed a step coming down and nearly slid across the floor on my face, she turned one of the chairs around and said:

"You had better sit down for a bit."

I did sit down. The girl went on talking.

"There is no way to get out. I have tried. Did they take the money from you and then not let me go back to my father? Is he terribly worried? Is he sick? Father and I were very close to each other"—and very low—"ever since my mother died."

By this time I had searched myself pretty well. Everything was gone, including cigarettes and matches. My brain was clearing—such brains as I have to clear. Finally I said:

"Do you know Miss Conners—Miss Cathleen Conners?"

"No," she answered.

"A singer in a night club?"

"Oh, father doesn't allow me to go to night clubs. I don't even want to go. I think I have seen her picture and heard her on the radio. She is very beautiful and has a lovely voice."

"Sure," I nodded, "a fine heart and a soul that—" But I stopped there. If she didn't go to night clubs, there was no use of her hearing language that the worst of them wouldn't stand for.

"Tell me," she said, "what happened."

"No, there is no use in telling you that. It's about you. Do you know any of the men who kidnaped you? Anything about them? Anything that you might disclose that would help—"

"Why, no," she cut in quickly. "I never saw them before. It's just money, isn't it?"

Her eyes were wide, and a sudden touch of terror that I hadn't seen before was beginning to creep in.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked.

"I wasn't—until now," she said hesitantly. "They told me that when father paid a sum of money they would send me home. I was afraid at first—terribly afraid when they grabbed me in the park. They hurt me then. But since then—until now— Oh, they can't want anything but money."

"That's right." I cursed myself for putting such an idea into her head, but I guess I hadn't straightened myself out, yet. "Don't you worry, Dorothy. Your father will pay, and you'll be free enough. They just wanted me—well, for another reason."

"But I am worried. I am really frightened. When they brought you in, it was someone else; someone worse off than I was; someone I could help." Her voice wasn't so

steady, now, and her face was paler. A little hand with small, trembling fingers felt at her throat. "Why don't they get the money and let me go? What else could they want of me?"

I got up and steadied her, held her, ruffled the tawny head of hair that sank slowly onto my shoulder. She was just a kid. A brave little kid who hadn't given way. And now that I was there—a man who— And I skipped that thought as she had her first cry.

I talked to her and encouraged her. I don't know exactly what I said, and maybe she didn't either. I didn't try to figure things out—that is what had happened in the past. Maybe my future wasn't going to be long enough to do anything about it. The Admiral had taken everything from me that I could use except my shoes, and I couldn't use them, now.

The girl steadied herself. After I finished my pep talk she said quietly:

"They *are* going to kill you—aren't they?"

"Not them," I told her. "You sit down for a minute." And when I got her seated: "Didn't you ever hear the story of Captain Kidd? After they had locked him up in a stone house on the island and he had tried every way of escaping, he thought he'd try the door to see if it was locked. And by gosh, it wasn't. I'm going to have a turn around. I never saw the spot, yet, I couldn't get out of if I wanted to."

I went to work. The room wasn't very large. There was a little washroom off it. There were heavy drums that contained oil or something. I even moved them from the wall. There were no holes behind them or beneath them. I had found a spot I couldn't get out of, all right. You could have packed twenty-five men in that cement vault, and they couldn't have gotten out.

It seemed to help the girl to watch me try. She even got up from the chair and came over to help me when I got one of the wooden steps of the stairs partly free. I'm a strong man. The work did me good. It sweated the ether out of me.

At last the lower step of the stairs was out of its moorings and in my hands—broken rusty nails and all. A weapon of defense when the boys came down? No, a weapon of offense for me, right now. I'm not a lad to wait for action. If action doesn't come to me, I go after it.

I went after it right then. First, I tried using that thick length of wooden step as a wedge against the trapdoor. No go there.

Then I used it as a battering-ram, but I couldn't get any force behind it standing on those steps. Finally, I knelt down on the third from the top step, held the board over my right shoulder and, with both hands clutching it, let it drive up with all my one hundred eighty pounds behind it.

It made a noise, but nothing else. No wood cracked in the trap. No hinges gave, and no rusty nails groaned. This prison was evidently well prepared.

Suddenly a tiny hole in the trap opened. A man spoke. It was the Admiral.

"Want service, eh?" he laughed. "Well, go down and press the buttons. You know—one, for ice water; two, for the valet; and three, for a punch in the nose." And when I didn't say anything: "You'll die soon enough without trying to hurry matters. And you won't be so comfortably off for the last few hours —nor with a pretty girl to amuse

you. Though you'll still have the oil, even if it isn't in the barrels."

A long pause, then a voice that held no laughter.

"You're going to burn, Race, just as Frankie will burn tonight!"

The hole disappeared. Someone was very close to me. It was the girl, of course. She said:

"What do they mean, you're going to burn? The oil? The barrels? I've been afraid of those barrels. I've been—Mr. Williams—Race, they're going to burn us to death!"

And without thinking, I said:

"No, not you. Just me."

This time it was I who gave her the water to drink. This time I supported her head when she took it. I was half holding her in the chair when she spoke.

"You"—she gripped at my hand with icy fingers—"know who these men are? If you do, tell me. When I'm free—if I am free—I'll let the police know and—"

"Don't you know who they are?" She looked at me oddly. "I mean, couldn't you identify any of them again?"

"I don't think so." She shook her head. "It was so quick in the park. In the car there was a bag over my head."

"But I mean here—since they brought you here?"

"Since they brought me here, whoever visits me wears a heavy overcoat that hides his build, has his hat well pulled down and a mask over his face."

I sighed with relief. The girl was safe, then. If they didn't intend that she should live, why hide their faces? No, the kidnaping of Dorothy Nester was just a professional job for cash. Greed came first. Once they had her—or, at least, once the Admiral had her, he thought of vengeance. And that was the part I was to play. Vengeance and money! The Admiral could never operate in the city of New York while I was alive. Now—But what could possibly have made Cathleen Conners trap me for the Admiral to kill? I would have trusted her in anything. And with a curse came the thought: I did.

I looked around the place again. There had been a tiny hole in the trapdoor. Was there any other tiny hole? Any other place where one of these men could listen to our talk? If they could, one of them would be straining his ears, now. So I said loud enough for anyone to hear:

"I don't know who they are, either, Dorothy. And don't you try to know." She put those great, child-like glims on me. "Don't worry about me, kid. I made a mess of things. I'm just a lad who played his own confidence and conceit once too often."

She shook her head.

"You are not afraid, yet you must feel the . . . the danger. You tried and succeeded in keeping up my courage when inside of me I felt that I would go mad. Inside of you, you must know the horrible thing you are to face. I think you are very brave, Race Williams. Very brave, indeed."

"You should see me when—" I started and stopped.

The trapdoor above had opened. Feet were coming down the stairs.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH FOR TWO!

The time had come! Coated and hatted and with faces masked in black, three men were slowly descending those wooden steps. Three guns were held steadily in three

hands; those hands were slightly raised. The guns pointed directly at me!

I knew Jackson because of his great bulk. I knew the Admiral because he was giving the orders as he brought up the rear. The third squat figure I didn't recognize. The Admiral said in a low whisper:

"Under no circumstance is he to be shot to death."

I stepped back, licked at my lips and lifted the heavy hunk of wood that had been the bottom step. If what he said was true, there was going to be a hell of a mess in that room. Some broken arms and legs, maybe a head or two—mine included.

Jackson stood on one side of the stairs, the figure I didn't know on the other. The Admiral remained on what had been the next to the lowest step, but was now the lowest.

"Like a Greek god you look, Williams—Sucker Williams." He said sharply: "Come here, girl." And before I could make up my mind to speak or not: "Come here, girl, or I'll put a bullet in your leg and one in his head!"

The girl moved quickly toward him. I was going to make a play for it. But I didn't. Two reasons: One, that I was pretty certain they wouldn't obey orders if I let go with that plank as I jumped forward. Two, that the girl might get killed in the mix-up.

The next minute it was too late. The girl had passed between the two men. The Admiral had slipped back up a step and dragged her with him.

"Drop the board, Williams," he said. "You think you're a hero standing there; so we'll see if you can fill the part." He clutched up the girl's arm, swung it behind her back. She screamed with pain. "I'll break it next!" he said.

I dropped the board. The girl's eyes had closed. She sank to the step, half lay there at the Admiral's feet.

"All right," the Admiral said to Jackson and the other man as he pushed the girl's head away from the step with his foot. "Tie him up."

Did I let them tie me? Of course I did. What else could I do? How could I be worse off? Besides, I expected to find myself tied up long ago. They sat me down on a chair with two guns sticking into my stomach; then they pulled rope from under their coats and went to work on me. I strained a bit, of course. But they got the ropes tight enough.

When they had me strapped in the chair, the Admiral came over, surveyed the job and gave orders. My hands that were bound in front of me he had changed so that they were tied down to my ankles. I sat in a crouching position with no back rest. My head was jerked too far forward.

I didn't get the idea of tying me up like that. My hope was that they were going to carry me and the chair some place else. I wouldn't have a chance to escape from that room, even if I had both my guns with me. But if they took me to another room, tied just like that— I licked at my lips. That was my hope.

I was watching the girl. She was moving there at the foot of the steps. Her eyes were half open now, and she was peering through them. I could see her pulling one knee under her. Plucky little thing —she was going to make a dash for freedom.

She did. But she wasn't more than up a step when the Admiral swung, made the stairs in one leap and gathered her in his arms. She

fought then for the first time; kicked and screamed as he was backed down the steps by the force of her weight and her lurching body.

"Little she-devil," he said as he swayed back almost under the light. Then quiet in that room.

The Admiral's hat had been knocked off. The girl had clutched at his mask, torn it from his face and held it triumphantly in her hand. In the dead silence that followed she looked straight into his face and cried out:

"I'd know you anywhere, now—any place! Harm Race Williams, and some day I'll point you out to the police."

Jackson and the smaller man looked at the Admiral. The Admiral held the girl's arms, shrugged his shoulders. Then he said to the smaller man:

"Take her above, Louie, and wait for Jackson. When he joins you, take her to the . . . the house in the Bronx."

"I won't have any hand in killing a woman. I—" The smaller man stopped.

The Admiral said calmly:

"Take her above and be quiet."

Louie grabbed Dorothy Nester roughly and half led, half dragged her up the steps. I don't think she got the full significance of what his words meant. I strained uselessly against the ropes.

The girl, wanting, believing that she might be saving my life, had forfeited her own when she looked into the Admiral's face. I think that she realized it, too, as she reached the landing above. Her sudden cry of terror rang in my ears, then—and for a long time afterward.

Jackson said:

"The ropes are tight, now. But if you want them tighter, boss, I can go above and get more rope."

"No-no." The Admiral shook his head. "Houdini, himself, would have trouble in getting out of that mess. Even if Williams did get free, he couldn't get out of the place, anyway. We could come back and do the job over again, tomorrow."

"Will I roll one of the oil vats over, now?" Jackson asked. "We can use it to set the box on."

"No"—the Admiral shook his head—"our box is to go on the floor. That's why I have Williams strapped over in the position he's in. Not just so he'll look more like the monkey he imitated tonight. I want him to see the hands of the clock plainly. If the box is set too high up, it will blow a hole clean through the ceiling—beams or no beams. And I want our good friend, Race Williams, to feel the heat—as my friend will feel the heat tonight. I don't want him to be crushed to death."

Maybe I didn't understand exactly what he meant then. But I knew a few minutes later. The Admiral went above; and, while he was gone, Jackson rolled a few of the big drums of oil from the wall. I think I got the idea even before the Admiral returned.

Jackson put his hand in his pocket, bent over one of the drums of oil. I didn't see the tool he used. I didn't need to. But he punctured a hole in one of them. Almost at once there were fumes like gasoline, and a bit of the slimy stuff poured through the hole onto the cement floor. He plugged it up then with a bit of cork; then he bored a hole in another.

The floor was not even. My chair was about in the center of it, and the oil trickled down toward my feet. It was then that the Admiral came back. He was walking slowly

down the steps with a large oblong box that looked like a radio. He carried it very carefully as he came toward me, set it down about three feet away from me and pushed it a bit closer. I could see the alarm clock plainly when the Admiral moved it a little closer.

"It'll blow his head off for him and do a damned good job," Jackson said.

The Admiral's voice was very low as he moved the box a little farther from me.

"I wouldn't have that happen," he said. "Not to Race Williams, tonight. Go up and toss me down that package of newspapers; then go. I want to be alone with the man who is killing my friend, tonight."

Jackson paused on the steps, hesitated, then said:

"And the dame? She knows, now."

"After the alibi. We'll have to be at the Silver Slipper at least until midnight," the Admiral continued. "And don't worry about the money. We'll have both. I sort of horned in on your little affair. Kidnaping was never for me"—he looked at me—"but I like this one. I like it very much indeed. There—just the paper, Jackson."

Jackson pounded up the stairs. The Admiral pulled up the only other chair in the room and sat down, facing me. I hadn't spoken a word yet, and I hadn't intended to. There was always a chance.

"It's been almost eighteen months since you sent Frankie Collins to the death house at Sing Sing. Every penny I could make on the West coast was spent in trying to save him from the chair."

"He killed a young girl," I said. "I pinned it on him, and it stuck."

"Well, I'll kill a young girl, too. Wouldn't you like to pin that on me?"

"A couple of Oriental rats, eh?" was all I said.

His face went white. Maybe his voice trembled a little when he spoke, but it was still low and soft.

"Tonight," he went on, "I will sit in the Silver Slipper at eleven o'clock. That is the time my friend burns. And that is the time that the time clock goes off on this little machine here, and you burn, too. Not quickly, I hope, but slowly. It—" A sudden jar behind him as a flat bundle of papers struck the floor. Then his quiet voice: "Thank you, Jackson." And back to me: "Before I leave you I will pull the plugs from those drums of oil. The oil will come up around your feet."

He looked up toward the ceiling.

"It is very powerful, but I doubt if it will crash the beams down on you. But it will make a hole big enough to create a draft. Are you susceptible to drafts, Sucker Williams?" And when I didn't speak, he took out a cigarette and lit it. "I am not too unjust or unkind. Would you like a smoke? Never fear, the oil is well plugged. There won't be any fire—yet."

I guess I never needed a smoke so much before in my life, but I saw it in his eyes in time and shook my head. But I didn't set my mouth tightly enough.

"Take mine, then," he said, and, snatching it from his lips, jammed the lighted end into my mouth. "What, don't you like a little fire?" He came to his feet in sudden anger as though he couldn't continue sitting there. "So you won't cry out—now. But you will. You will!" He raised his fist, changed his mind, and started crumpling up the paper and tossing it about the room.

"Think of it, Williams," he talked on. "I came to the city and openly let people know that you dared not face me. Tonight I will sit in the Silver Slipper. A hundred or more people will see me there. My friend dies, but you dare not come where you know me to be. Tomorrow, the next day, a month or a year later. Race Williams never comes. Many will be sure they know; more will guess; but none can prove." He went to the drums, now, and took out the corks. "You will be just another—a different name, perhaps—but just another who crossed the Admiral and was never seen again."

"All right," I finally said. "That will settle me. Why not let the girl go? She isn't apt to run across you and—"

"Apt?" He raised his voice on that word. "There isn't a chance that she will ever see me or anyone else after tonight. I play only sure things. Kidnaping—*phaw*—that is not for me. But Jackson was set on it. He had made his plans, and most peculiarly they fitted in with what I had in my mind. Everyone knows you drove me from the city. Now, they will know that I drove you from the earth. So I want to thank you for that little trick with the cigar. It'll make quite a story."

"How?" My mouth was just beginning to get over its rawness.

"The insult was public. All the gentlemen of my profession, and that includes some respectable criminals who are called politicians, saw or will hear of it. They will say: 'Race Williams came straight to the Admiral's table, stuck a lighted cigar in the Admiral's mouth, and from that night—that very hour—Race Williams was never seen again.' Ah, the oil is at your feet. Can you see the clock plainly?"

He backed away from the oil which already surrounded my chair and was drifting toward his feet.

"It is ten minutes to nine," he said as he reached the stairs. "You have two hours. But don't be impatient or even hopeful if the hands pass the hour by a little. I made sure it wouldn't go off before eleven. You know how they are sometimes slow at Sing Sing, and I have just a touch of sentiment in the things I do."

He didn't speak after that, and neither did I. Anything I said in favor of the girl would only hurt her. He wasn't even sarcastic as he looked from the slowly flowing oil on the hard cement to my face. He didn't joke as he had when Jackson and the other man, Louie, were around. He just stared at me there, studied my face with cruel contempt as he backed slowly up the stairs. Then he sat there and watched me intently.

He never moved, but his face changed as I looked at the clock. A minute passed—five—ten—fifteen. And he didn't speak; I didn't speak. He was watching for me to crack. Nine thirty came and went. Maybe I stiffened under his eyes; maybe I didn't. Certainly my back should have ached, but it didn't. I never saw the hands of a clock move faster. Ten was gone—ten fifteen—How long would he wait? Ten thirty came, and I closed my eyes. I half wished the damned thing would go off and blow us both to hell.

And then a real jerk inside of me. Suppose he stayed there until the damn thing blew up, and then sneaked upstairs? But he wouldn't. He wouldn't dare.

And I heard him move; heard the stairs give slightly. I turned my head and looked. He was still sit-

ting there, grinning at me like an ape. The rotten, vicious— Yes, he had tricked me into looking by his movement. I looked at the clock. It was ten forty-five. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I have always said I could take it. I was taking it, now.

Then he was gone, and I heard the crack of heavy metal against metal. Three times I heard it. So he must have driven home three great bars of steel across the top of the trap. No wonder I couldn't budge it.

And I was alone with death!

CHAPTER VII.

ACE IN THE SOLE.

Alone with death, eh? Don't you believe it. I had my ace in the hole. Or my ace in the sole, if you want to put it that way. My fingers felt all thumbs, and great swollen thumbs at that, as they tore at the lace of my right shoe. Fourteen minutes to go— Cold, lifeless fingers. From the ropes? I like to think that. Certainly it wasn't fear. No, not fear—at least, not fear for myself.

Why was I digging inside my right shoe and pulling at the lace which wasn't so hard to untie? Because I had hard work lacing it up in that damned tight squeeze in the trunk carrier. I have a bright thought once in a while. I had one then.

Did you guess it? Well, I had it, now; that razor-sharp bit of tin that had nearly cut my neck in two. It was slipped down in my shoe. And, now, I had it between my fingers, pulling it out of the shoe. Then I let it stay there a moment while I worked those fingers up and down. If it fell into the oil I would die. And the girl would die!

Thoughts, then—mad thoughts. How would I save the girl when I got free of the ropes? I didn't know. But I was thinking of her, and I was thinking of life.

Yes, I had been squirming around in that trunk carrier when the Admiral sprayed the ether on me. But he had said I wasn't to die until eleven o'clock. That meant that I was to live for a few more hours, and if I was ever conscious again, I expected to be tied up. And I expected to use something to cut the ropes that held me. That bit of tin that nearly cut my neck to pieces was the thing for me. It had been tough staying conscious while I found it, planted it in my shoe and laced that shoe again.

But now I was tied in a swell posi-



I put two slugs in his chest. He was off his feet before the second one caught him.

tion to work that razorlike bit of steel. I'm not going to say it was hard work forcing the piece of steel or tin or whatever it was through that rope. It was sharper than any knife I ever saw. Although it didn't exactly cut it like butter. The difficulty was in holding it in fingers that shook—in hands that shook.

Once, it went from my fingers, slithered on the rope. A deep cut in one finger, and I had it back. And . . . and . . . hell, I was free; I was loose; I was straightening myself in the chair and unwinding and slicing the rest of the rope!

Three minutes to go—plenty of time. There was the box. I didn't know the mechanism of it. I only knew how carefully the Admiral had handled it. I wouldn't fool with it. But there was the box, and there was the sink. I had the box in my hand and was skidding on the oil.

I made the sink and stopped. Two minutes of eleven. Two minutes to go and—

What good would it do the girl if I were still alive? I'd be alive in that room—unable to get out just as I was unable to get her out before. It wouldn't do her any good.

But it would do me good. I'd be alive. Someone would come back, of course, and I might hide by the stairs and get that person as he came in—two of them—three of them. Silly? Perhaps; but I'd be alive and have time to think.

It hit me like that. Maybe it was a good thought; maybe it wasn't That's the stuff, Race, I told myself. You and the girl alive together or dead together. Hadn't the Admiral said if the infernal machine was too close to the ceiling, it would blow a hole in it? Hadn't he said that? Sure he had!

One minute—a half a minute—I almost landed on my back as I ran to the stairs, made them, juggled the box of death and left it there. I left it there right under the trap on the top step.

What would happen when it blew up? Your guess is as good as mine. People say I don't use my head to think, eh? Well, when that explosion came, it would settle things one way or the other. No matter which way it happened, I wouldn't have to think any more.

Maybe I was excited and ran around a bit, but I finally wound up behind one of the drums, crouched like a sprinter ready to start. It wouldn't do me any good to be knocked unconscious by the blast, and it wouldn't do me any good to be burned alive before I could reach the stairs. But I chose the oil drum and stuck to it.

Everything in the one blast—the girl's life and mine.

How would I find her after the blast if I did get free? How would I know where she was? How would I figure that out with my head? Don't make me laugh. I had gone through enough brain trouble. I'd squeeze the thought out of the Admiral's throat, his black tongue, his black heart, or out of his black soul if I had to.

No more fooling if I got the break. If—if— I stuck my fingers in my ears and waited.

God how fast the time had passed before, and now it seemed so slow. And—it came!

All hell broke loose in that room, and I broke loose with it! I dashed toward the stairs—and they weren't there. Not even steps. Just a single support leading up to the trapdoor. Did I say trapdoor? But there wasn't any trapdoor; just a great hole in the ceiling and a couple of twisted, broken bits of metal that

might have been strong steel bars a few seconds before.

The light was still hanging from the ceiling. Maybe it helped me; maybe it didn't. The whole place seemed to be ablaze! A sudden, gentle, sweeping flame turned into a roar as I made the trap, felt the single side support that had held the stairs drop from under me, and swung by my hands.

Flames licked at my feet as I chinned myself—yes, shouldered, waisted, and just about kneed myself up through that hole and onto the floor above. A warehouse; no light but the darting flame behind me.

I was free.

A few feet down the wooden floor, and I jerked off my coat, smothered the burning oil that clung to my soaked shoes, spotted a far-distant window and a street light.

After that, the screech of engines, flames leaping high in the air behind me, a taxi driver who was surprised that I didn't want to stop and see the fire, and I was on my way.

No head, eh? After all, I had gone through. And the worst I had to show for it was a hot-foot.

CHAPTER VIII.
FLOOR SHOW.

It was twelve o'clock when I parked my car by the side-street entrance and walked into the Silver Slipper. I had treated myself to a shower, a shave, a change of clothes all over, and, of course, a couple of guns swung in my shoulder holsters. Also, I used the telephone.

Maybe I hadn't been fried after all—at least on the outside. Inside I was right up to the boiling point. Just as I turned toward the main floor the lights went out, and I heard the rich voice of Cathleen Conners; the voice that dug into people's hearts—into their souls. And the ad writer who put in that line was correct. It dug into my soul all right.

An assistant manager back behind the tables gripped my arm, said:

"Pretty crowded, sir. You know since we have that midnight special of Miss Conners, it brings in the people. I'll find you a place after the lights go up."

I slipped a bill into his hand and said:

"Lead me to Fletcher's table. He's expecting me. First, tip the spot man to put the light on Fletcher when Miss Conners is doing her stuff. No, he won't be offended."

The man squeezed my arm.

"Oh— O. K., Mr. Williams. Mr. Fletcher said to watch for you." And after giving instructions to a boy, he said: "Mr. Fletcher said to tell you we have class tonight. Did you know that Inspector Nelson is here—and Sergeant O'Rourke? Did you know it?"

I let the anxiety in his voice slide by me.

"They've got to have fun once in a while." Then I flopped down in the chair at Fletcher's table and saw Cathleen doing her stuff before a red-faced, bald-headed man who seemed confused and bewildered as the two spotlights crossed, one striking Cathleen and the other smacking on his flat, jowled face. At that, he liked it.

Cathleen was hitting, "Won't You Be My Pretty Daddy?"

I turned in the darkness, said:

"Hello, Fletcher. Did my telephone call surprise you?"

"You can't surprise me with anything you do, Williams. But I moved up to a better ringside table. What's doing? I won a hundred dollars tonight, thanks to you." And

when I wanted to know how: "Oh, a ward-heeler bet me you'd never live to see the hour that Frankie Collins was electrocuted. Forget, eh? You sent him up a year and a half ago. I put through a call half an hour back. He was strapped in the chair screaming like a yellow rat."

"Which he was. You were wise to bet on me." And to myself I thought that he should have had odds. "Cathleen Conners don't look so good."

"Pretty good." I couldn't see Fletcher's face, of course, but I got the curiosity in his voice when he spoke. "She seemed upset earlier in the evening. I asked her if she had seen you. It threw her. But she's a trouper. Nothing could kill her act."

"No?" I grinned in the darkness. "A hundred bucks says she won't be able to finish her act. Want to lose that hundred?"

"Done," he said. "But no rough stuff this time." And then, "Your boy friend, the cigar-eating Admiral, is around. At a table with the gutter-jumper Jackson and a lug called Louie—a nervous boy."

"I'll bet you—" I stopped talking. The light was swinging around. It gave me a bit of a start when I saw Nelson's face flash into the picture and fade away again. I didn't blame Cathleen for swinging in her dance and letting his puss pass. Even the spot man hurried it on. Then she got a well-known playboy who had half a dozen giggling blondes at his table; giggling on the outside. Inside, their little mechanical hearts burned with greed as they fought for this lad's affection. And that affection ran into four figures at times.

I didn't pay much attention to Cathleen then. I was just beginning to make out shadowy forms and white, indistinct faces from the lights behind the tables. Fletcher said:

"You seem sort of strange, Race, not your easy-going self. Your voice, well, not exactly shakes, but seems full of excitement. Will you have a drink or have you had it?"

"No," I said, "I haven't had it—not yet."

"Not yet, eh?" His voice left me with the impression that he was simply thinking the question aloud and did not expect an answer. Anyway, he didn't get one.

The playboy was getting a bit rough, trying to pull Cathleen down on his knees, and the spotlight moved on.

I had dropped to one knee and was hidden from the spotlight by the table and cloth when the sharp glare lit right on Fletcher. But I chanced a look-see from under his arm. There was a surprised look on Cathleen's face. She hesitated. But the spot stayed, and she went into her act, although there was an empty chair at our table almost between Fletcher and her.

Neither of them liked the little show. But I did, and I waited for the part of the spiel where she swung her back toward the man, buried her head in her hands a moment, then spun around and cooed: "Won't you be my pretty daddy?"

The turn came. I snapped to my feet, slid around Fletcher, and oozed into the vacant seat. There were a couple of laughs and a couple of cries of, *"Hush,"* and Cathleen swung back.

"Won't you be my pretty—"

She got that far and no farther. I came to my feet and said grimly:

"You bet, kid."

She fell back a step, staggered, raised her hand to her mouth and

screamed. Did I win my hundred dollars? And how! The spot followed her weaving, falling, lurching body for a moment. Then the guy in the light booth got wise to himself, and the spots snapped out. Both of them at once.

But just before the spots went, a shot rang out—two in quick succession! The first there at my left side, the second bringing a cry from far back of me. Then the house lights went on, and I saw the play.

Cathleen Conners was gone. A wild figure had taken her place on the empty dance floor. It was standing, partly shielding the Admiral, whom I could see crouched there at the table behind it.

The man with the gun in his hand was Jackson. He wasn't any hero. He wasn't trying to protect his friend, the Admiral. He was trying to save his own life. He was panic-stricken. There was terror in his face. He fired at me again—wildly, blindly this time! He thought I had come there to get him.

Don't blame him. He was right. He didn't hit me. I didn't fire then to protect myself. And I didn't fire simply to get Jackson, though the last wasn't a bad thought. I fired to protect others in that room from his wild shots. I didn't go in for any trick shots. I didn't go in to shoot the gun out of his hand or cripple his arm. I didn't pick out his heart or his head with the intent to kill him—not because I didn't have the time—for I did.

I put two slugs right smack in his chest! He was off his feet when the second one caught him, but a man has to be sure in life—in death, too, for that matter—so the second shot was simply precautionary.

Who gave the order, I don't know. It might have come from the manager. It might have come from any of half a dozen sources. But someone turned out all the lights, plunging the place in blackness.

I heard Nelson, then, and O'Rourke. Nelson's voice boomed in sharp, threatening command for everyone to remain where seated. O'Rourke's voice was loud enough, but with more of an assurance that the police were taking care of things. Then he called for the lights.

I guess they got them. But not right away. I ran straight across the dance floor, bumped into one or two people, swung to my left and followed my guiding star—the little red light over the entrance to the talents' quarters. Then I was through the thick-curtained entrance.

Lights were dimmed along the carpeted hall with its several little halls leading off it. I knew Cathleen's dressing room. After bumping into frightened little girls and just as frightened big men, I found her room, grabbed the knob and turned it. The door was locked.

A rumpled bit of movement inside that room stopped almost at once. I bent, putting my eye to the keyhole. I had been right about the sound. A key was in the other side of the lock. I put my mouth close to the crack, called:

"Open the door, Cathleen. Open it, now!"

No answer. No time to fool. The Admiral, if he had any sense, would come back to Cathleen. And if he had any sense, he would never have any more, if you get what I mean—or even if you don't. One light tap on the door. No sound of feet crossing the floor within. Clutching the knob, I put my shoulder to the door—just once.

Like papier-mâché the cheap, light

wood about the lock cracked, split, and gave. I was in the room, and the door was closed behind me.

Cathleen was there by the closed closet door. It was as if she had decided to hide in the closet, but didn't have time. She swung and faced me like a cornered animal, her back against the door.

I dropped my gun back in its holster.

"I'm your pretty little daddy," I said as I slowly crossed the room, stretched out a hand and, clutching her by that long, slender, beautiful throat she was so proud of, pulled her to the center of the room.

Her lips trembled. She gasped: "You're not going to . . . to— I'm a woman."

"Yeah," I told her. "But there's no sex in crime. I'm not going to burn you to death, if that's what you mean."

"Like they—like those other men . . . you'd beat a woman? You'd . . . I'd die before I spoke, now. I won't tell you anything."

"Cathleen," I said slow, "you're rotten. And so am I, tonight." My hands tightened on her throat. I saw her mouth open. "But it's the girl, Dorothy Nester. I've got to know where she is."

"I don't know. I don't know!" Her hands came up and gripped at my single one. I loosened my fingers slightly, but they still sank into the soft flesh.

"Then why did you say you wouldn't tell?"

"I mean, I won't confess that they took the girl. I won't swear it against them. Listen, Race, I know, now, about you. They intended to harm you. But they swore they'd only hold you for a little time, wouldn't harm you, and then would let you go."

"You've been around too long to believe that," I told her and meant it. "There isn't a criminal in the city—or out of it, for that matter—who would ever dare treat me, Race Williams, like that and let me loose to get him afterward."

And when she stared at me.

"Jackson can't tell me," I said, "because I just shot him to death. The Admiral can't tell me because, since he didn't come in here, he's gone up to where he's hidden the girl to kill her."

"To kill her? No—he wouldn't do that! He couldn't do that!"

"He will and he can. His word against mine might be good enough before twelve men if he had a good crooked lawyer. But it wouldn't stand up in court if Dorothy Nester was there to put the finger on him."

"No"—she made an attempt to shake her head as she talked—"he wouldn't dare. Not with me alive."

"He'll kill you, then. Or he'll have an alibi. Or you don't really care if she lives or dies so long as you get the money. No, Cathleen, I don't know what it was in you, but it must have been there all along. You've got murder in your soul."

"No—no! He can't harm her and—"

My fingers tightened on her throat.

"I never handled a woman like this before," I told her. "But I like the kid. She'll lose her life because she tried to save mine. She tore off his mask and saw his face. She thought I was to die and—"

She swung from me in sudden strength. I lunged toward her again, then stopped. She was straight and stiff, and her eyes were steady. She was saying:

"I didn't know they'd kill you. At least I didn't admit that to myself. But it wouldn't have mattered. I was turning over you to take her

place. You see, Race, it was her life or yours. Dorothy Nester is my daughter!"

CHAPTER IX.
THE MAN WHO KNEW.

Cathleen Conners nearly collapsed then. But what of that? I nearly collapsed myself. She was mumbling an explanation. She had married Nester under her real name when she was first in the chorus. His parents didn't like it. The baby, Dorothy, was born. Cathleen agreed to an annulment. Then Nester married the society girl his parents picked. She was good to the child, but died a few years later. Cathleen had never seen either of them until the kidnaping; that is, she had never seen them that they knew about, but she had gone places where she knew her daughter would be. She—

And suddenly it came. She beat at my chest.

"He'll kill her! He'll kill her! He'll have to kill her, now," she cried wildly. "He knows where she is. He's in there."

She pointed at the closet door.

My lips set grimly. The Admiral, eh? Well, he wouldn't kill her, now. He wouldn't kill anyone. He wouldn't— I swung Cathleen around, opened the hall door, pushed her out, said:

"Don't let anyone in."

Then I closed the door, put a chair under the knob, blocking what was left of the door, and walked to the closet. I stood to one side and, reaching out, gripped the knob.

"All right, Admiral," I said as I flung the door open. "I'm to your left. Come out shooting. I'm on the kill."

Nothing happened. Then a gun was flung out on the floor. Another gun followed it. I wasn't boiling so much, now. I had made a mistake, and he had corrected it. If he had come out firing, I would have killed him and the girl Dorothy would have—

I almost had to support the body that, with hands raised high in the air, came out blabbering for mercy. I didn't need anyone to tell me it wasn't the Admiral. I didn't need anyone to tell me it was the squat man, Louie. Mask or no mask, I knew him.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me," he squealed like a trapped pig. "I heard the shots; saw Jackson go down; saw you kill him. I didn't want to harm the girl. You heard me say that. You heard me—"

"Where's the girl?" was all I said.

Louie didn't have enough of his senses about him to lie to me and say he didn't know. He was too busy thinking of his own life. He said:

"I can't tell you. You know the Admiral. He'd . . . he'd butcher me before—"

"Where's the girl?" I asked again. "There isn't going to be any Admiral to butcher you."

"If you were to tear me apart, Williams, I wouldn't speak for fear—"

I jerked my gun under his chin. He straightened. His head went back.

"Where's the girl?"

He fell to his knees, and between begging for his life and pleading with me not to hit him again, he told me. Did he tell me the truth? Sure he did! He wasn't able to make up lies; he could only stammer out the truth.

After I got the street and house number, and even direction how to find the house, I handed Louie both a straw to grab at and a rock to sink himself with. I told him that if I were late and the girl were dead,

he'd burn for murder just the same as if he had put the bullet in her head or the knife in her chest. That was the law, and Louie knew it. I told him if he helped me, I'd put in a word for him and maybe he'd only get twenty years instead of life. I even threw in a suspended sentence which was purely fancy on my part, since I knew the district attorney; but it sounded good to Louie. At least, the part about his not roasting to death if I were in time to save the girl.

It was hard to understand him, for he talked like a man with his mouth full of marbles. But here is what I got:

The house was in the Bronx, well up, and far down the street he gave me—even beyond the paved road, and back by itself among the trees. There were chickens in the yard, or had been, and I could find it easy by the busted wire fence and the chicken house. There was an old wooden shed used for a garage in the back.

"Mr. Williams," he said, and his teeth went into the "Anvil Chorus," "You can jump from that garage to the edge of a little wooden balcony. The girl's tied up in that room, and there are no bars or nothing across the windows. They're long ones—French they call them—with heavy shades. She's locked in that room and gagged and tied on a bed. No one is in the house. We all had to have our alibi here at the Silver Slipper, tonight!

"How did the Admiral get her there so quick?" I was trying to trip him up.

He licked at his lips, but told the truth, I was sure.

"Jackson and I took her there before the Admiral left the warehouse." And maybe he lied a little, now. "Jackson bound and gagged her. Maybe I helped. But we wouldn't kill her—no, not me, nor even Jackson. The Admiral only intended to keep her there until after we left the club here early in the morning. Then—"

"Then?" I encouraged him with the nose of my gun against his chin.

"Then"—he gulped it out—"he was going up and do the job, himself. She's alone there, but she can't move or talk. Jackson was very thorough in his job of binding and gagging her."

"And Cathleen Conners?"

Louie didn't want to say, but he did.

"I was to get her to come with me and pretend she could take the girl away alive, in return for . . . for handing you over to the Admiral."

"And take her up there and kill her, too?"

"Not me, not me!" He almost groveled on the floor. "If I could get her to go with me by telling her she could have the girl—free—I was to bring Cathleen to Lexington Avenue and Seventy-first Street where he would be waiting."

A hope there. I said:

"How long would he wait?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Jackson saw you, went crazy, and started to shoot. The Admiral said: 'Get the woman, Cathleen, Louie!' And that was all the time we had for anything."

Right, I thought. And that was all the time *I* had for anything.

"O. K., Louie," I said as I tapped the nose of my gun down on his head. Just like that, Louie went to sleep. Unpleasant? Of course it was. But what could I do with him until Cathleen got around to telling O'Rourke?

As for me, I turned toward the door, twisted the chair away, took

the knob just as it burst open, and Nelson hurled himself into the room.

"Look here, Race," he started, and then as I went to pass him: "No, you don't, my boy, I—"

He wasn't expecting it—couldn't have been—for I wasn't expecting to do it, myself, until my right hand turned into a fist and cracked against his chin! No gun that time—just the old fist. And Inspector Nelson sat down on the floor inside the room so I could close the door behind me when I hit the hall.

Out in the hall, more cops. O'Rourke was there. He grabbed my arm. I said:

"Nelson said for me to go ahead. There's been a kidnaping. I've got to save the girl. I—"

"Dorothy Nester?" O'Rourke asked.

"Yes," I was surprised, worried, too, because they weren't far from the door; and since it was broken around the lock, it didn't shut very tight. O'Rourke nodded.

"Father telephoned. Now, Race, you can't do this alone. Do you know where the girl is?"

"A lad in there will tell you, O'Rourke," I pleaded with the sergeant. And to Cathleen, who was leaning against the wall—or at least loud enough for her to hear: "She helped me, O'Rourke. Take care of her." I saw another plain-clothes man coming down the hall. "The cops would cause her death, now. I got to go."

O'Rourke said:

"Run along, Race. Nelson said so, eh?" And to the men, "Free passage, there."

Nelson bellowed then, but I was on my way. I didn't feel safe until I was in my own car and around the corner.

Feeling safe for my own getaway was all right. But what about the girl, Dorothy Nester? What about the kid who had forfeited her own life in her effort—for she did believe it—to save mine? How much of a start did the Admiral have? Plenty, I guess. But would he make speed to kill the girl? Would he chance too much speed? Also, would he have a car handy? I ate that thought—that question—the moment I asked myself it. The Admiral would always have a car handy. But Louie had told me he was to go and get Cathleen, tell her that Dorothy Nester was safe, then meet the Admiral at the corner of Lexington Avenue and Seventy-first Street.

I'd drive to the corner of Seventy-first Street. Maybe drive right up on the curb and smack the Admiral against the building. But there were objections to that. How long would he wait? He might drive on. He might be hiding in a doorway and see me come and telephone someone to kill the girl. Or since that was planned before the shooting, he might not go to Lexington Avenue at all.

I wanted to meet the Admiral, but my first duty was to the girl.

So I shot straight for the Bronx!

CHAPTER X.

BALCONY SCENE.

Cathleen Conners didn't seem so bad, now, though from a personal viewpoint, I couldn't exactly approve of what she did. So she didn't believe they'd harm me? She wouldn't let herself believe anything like that. Poor woman—it was my life or her daughter's. I shrugged my shoulders. There was no use to complain. I'm no authority on mother love, but from now on

I'll have my doubts about mothers carrying that love just a bit too far.

This was the chase. The way I like it, especially when there is a lad who tried to roast me alive at the end of the rainbow—my rainbow. If it wasn't for the girl—and such a kid—I might even have enjoyed it. There were no two ways about it, now. The city—the entire country—there wasn't even room in life for both the Admiral and myself. I set my lips grimly. He had made that crack some time back. It was his crack, and he could lie in it.

But the girl. Would I be on time? Would the Admiral rush right into the house and kill her? Would he take her somewhere else? Would he leave— I gulped, but I had the thought just the same—would he leave her body there or take it away with him?

Yes, Dorothy Nester complicated things all right. The Admiral's number was up, but he'd kill the girl and destroy what he thought was any real evidence against him.

I was nervous all right, but an eager sort of nervous. I remembered with tight lips how the Admiral had sat on those cellar steps and stared. I remembered, too, the sweat that broke out on my forehead. Well, we'd see now where the sweat broke.

Louie's directions were good. He needed to make them good. His life depended on my time to begin with—and my life to end with. Yes, Louie's directions were a little too good. I passed the houses on the cement road, shot by the lots and landed on the dirt road he told me about. But I landed on it too soon—and too hard. I didn't know the ruts in it. The car swerved and bounced, and I saw the house; at least the roof of it. The moonlight wasn't so bad. I could see where I was going; so I doused the lights, swung lightly up on a dirt-and-sand bank and hopped out of the car. So much for the car. That couldn't be seen from the house.

The moonlight wasn't so welcome, now. The house, as Louie had said, was well back from the road. But there wasn't much bush or trees or anything within a couple of hundred feet of it. It looked as if the place might have been used as a dump—but not lately.

Crawling up on the bank I could easily peek over and see the house, the garage and a sort of driveway that led up to it. For the garage was on another bank behind the house. And—I couldn't be sure, of course—I thought, or at least hoped, that it was the flashing metal of a car I saw just inside its open doors.

Now what to do? You can't run slightly bent and duck in and out of moonbeams any more than you can among raindrops. I had two choices. One was to try and get into the house from below. He'd hear me maybe, and if he did, would he go on with his gruesome job, or would he come down and lay for me? I smacked my lips. If I was sure he would come down and lay for me, I'd forget what Louie had told me and take the lower floor.

Understand, this wasn't conscious thinking, and it wasn't delayed thinking, and I was acting while I thought. I was running across that lot, hopping tin cans, slipping on wet papers and making my decision almost as I reached the house. It was a car in the garage. The Admiral hadn't left yet!

With that little jump in my heart came another jump that didn't make me feel so good. The Admiral had also arrived.

No time to lose, now. I was around the back of the house, up the

bank on which stood the flat-roofed garage. I could see the balcony Louie had described, the French window, yes, and a light—just a sliver of light—beyond tightly drawn dark-green shades. And the garage. The far side of its roof was almost on a line with that balcony and the lighted window beyond it; the only light in the entire house.

Get the lay? The garage was built on a bank, but the side of that garage that faced the house was propped up by a stone wall to keep the shaky structure from falling off its foundation. Between the garage and the house was a ditch. When you stood below the balcony just between the house and the garage, you couldn't reach the balcony—not by a good number of feet you couldn't. But if you went around to the front of the garage and climbed to the roof; then the garage was well above the balcony or maybe on a level with it.

And that's what I was doing. There was a window on the side of the garage all right, but it didn't seem to me as good a spot as one of the open doors. I jumped, grabbed the top of one door, chinned myself, tossed a knee up and climbed to the torn tin on top of the wobbly shed. But the tin held, and there I was—a good six feet from the balustrade of the balcony, and perhaps four feet above it.

Time would be wasted. I would have to remove my shoes and leap for that balcony. If the Admiral was already in that room he might hear me. And he was there! At least someone was there. I could see the shadow cross the long sliver of light. I could see something. Yes, I could see everything; everything I wanted to see, and a lot I didn't want to see, too, through a great rent in one of the shades.

The Admiral was standing over a little figure on the bed—a figure that was struggling. The girl, of course! He must have untied her to try and force her from the house. I saw things plainly enough. I saw the girl's hair, her face, her eyes wild with terror, and the gag across her mouth. I even saw the ropes on the bed. And then I saw her sink back; saw the Admiral's black sleeve, his white hand, and the thing that was in that hand. The thing that caught for a moment and flashed into the light!

I didn't see enough of the Admiral to shoot; to shoot to kill. I didn't—

No thoughts then. One quick look; one jerk for twin guns with two hands, and I made the leap. Oh, not to land on the balcony rail and stay there, but just to use that balcony rail as a stepping stone for what was to follow.

I thrust myself from that garage roof with force. I hit the balcony rail fairly accurately. Then, letting my body ride with plenty of steam behind it, I cross my left arm before my eyes and hurled my one hundred and eighty pounds of beef against those French windows—or doors—or what have you.

Were the glass doors locked? Don't ask me. I didn't know, then, and I never did find out afterward.

I can't say I counted on a panic on the Admiral's part that I didn't get. I can't say that I even hoped he would be tossed completely by that kind of an entrance. I simply say that he should have been startled, at least. I didn't count or hope anything when I made the leap. I didn't even think. I just went smack from the railing through those doors like a baby tank.

Those French windows split in the center as though a big gun had

cracked them. Glass, wood, yes, and I went all over the floor together. That's one thing I never had a chance to practice on, and my performance was entirely unrehearsed.

Surprised? Yes, the Admiral was surprised and nothing more. I was flat on my face when he fired the first time; had lifted my head and looked into his eyes before he fired the second time! He was cool and calm and shot deliberately. The raising of my head kept the first bullet from going through the top of it.

The slug hit the floor below my chin, skidded and, for some reason, didn't bury itself in the wood. How did I know that? Because I had a bad break and felt the lead tear into my chest!

I was trying to turn and face him when his second shot came. I didn't know where it hit me. At least, I didn't know then. I didn't feel any pain. I just knew it had hit me because my body jarred, and I felt the plump of it, soft and easy.

His third shot?

Don't be stupid. He had had his full quota of shots. He was leaning slightly forward, almost bending over me when I closed the index finger of my left hand. Somewhere under the chin it caught him!

He was a great little guy, the Admiral. There wasn't even surprise in his face—in his eyes. There was nothing there. There couldn't be. He was dead!

No pain, no nothing. The Admiral had all the breaks. That is, all the breaks until the last one. Now— Hell, I told you that before. He was dead, I said. Just dead!

I think I came to my feet. In fact, I know I did. I remember smiling at the girl. I remember her tearing the gag from her mouth and opening it to scream. I remember her looking at me. Her mouth hung open and her eyes were wide, but not with terror; with fear—fear for me.

I remember, too, that I heard a door crash below; that there were feet on the stairs. I looked at my hands; they were both empty. Then I saw my guns on the floor, bent forward to reach for one. The girl caught my head as I pitched on my hands and knees and grabbed at my guns.

"It's the police, Race," she said. "The sirens—I heard them. I—"

Maybe she helped me; maybe she didn't. But I was on my feet again as the door burst open. I don't know which one of them was in the room first, O'Rourke or Nelson, but it was Nelson who was walking toward me.

"Now, listen, Race—" He had his hand raised.

I jerked up my right hand, made a pass at Nelson, lurched forward, spun slightly, and O'Rourke caught me in his arms. That was like me, too. Sure—I had left the girl's arms to fall into O'Rourke's.

I grinned anyway, pointed to the floor, looked up at Nelson.

"There's your chestnuts, Nelson," I said. "At least, one chestnut—and burned to a crisp."

At least that's what O'Rourke said I said. I guess he was right.

Peculiar life. The bullets weren't so bad. Just a hole through my side, and a bit of lead that could have been pulled out of my chest with your forefinger and thumb. It was the glass that was the worst. It reminded me of when I was a kid, and a farmer let go with a load of buckshot when I was borrowing a few apples.

Bullets are all right. A doctor can go after them and tell you just about where you stand; but glass, it turns up later in the most unexpected places. Don't tell me, I know.

Dorothy Nester came to see me often, and one night Cathleen Conners came with Dorothy's father. The old man had been to call on me once before and stammered a bit of a speech about all the money in the world not being able to pay me for what I had done. After my fever had gone up a couple of degrees, he produced a check for ten thousand dollars.

Cathleen stood back a bit while Mr. Nester asked for my advice. He said:

"Through a great and a mutual sorrow and you, Mr. Williams, Cathleen and I have been brought happily together again. And we like it that way. Now"—he laughed sort of hollowly—"it's a peculiar question that I have to ask a man of action like yourself. Sort of advice to the lovelorn. Cathleen and I are thinking of—well—giving Dorothy a real mother. I might say a real mother and father together. But Cathleen said you were the one to decide. I don't quite understand. I suppose it's because you were her friend. She wants me to ask you if you believe she'd make a good mother."

"I'd rather she was my mother than my friend," I said just a bit viciously, and then I got what was bothering Cathleen. Would I talk? Would I toss a monkey wrench into the works? I looked at her a second or two—

"She's a wonderful mother," I said, and I let it go at that.

But I read it in Fletcher's column even before Dorothy told me about it. How did Fletcher know? Or did he know all along?

Dorothy said a few days later and just before I left the hospital:

"She's my real mother, Race. I always knew I had a real mother and wondered what it would be like to have someone—you know—a mother who would do anything in the world for you. She would—my mother would. Wouldn't she, Race?"

I took the hand she slipped into mine and made her very happy. But what I told her was strictly the truth. I said:

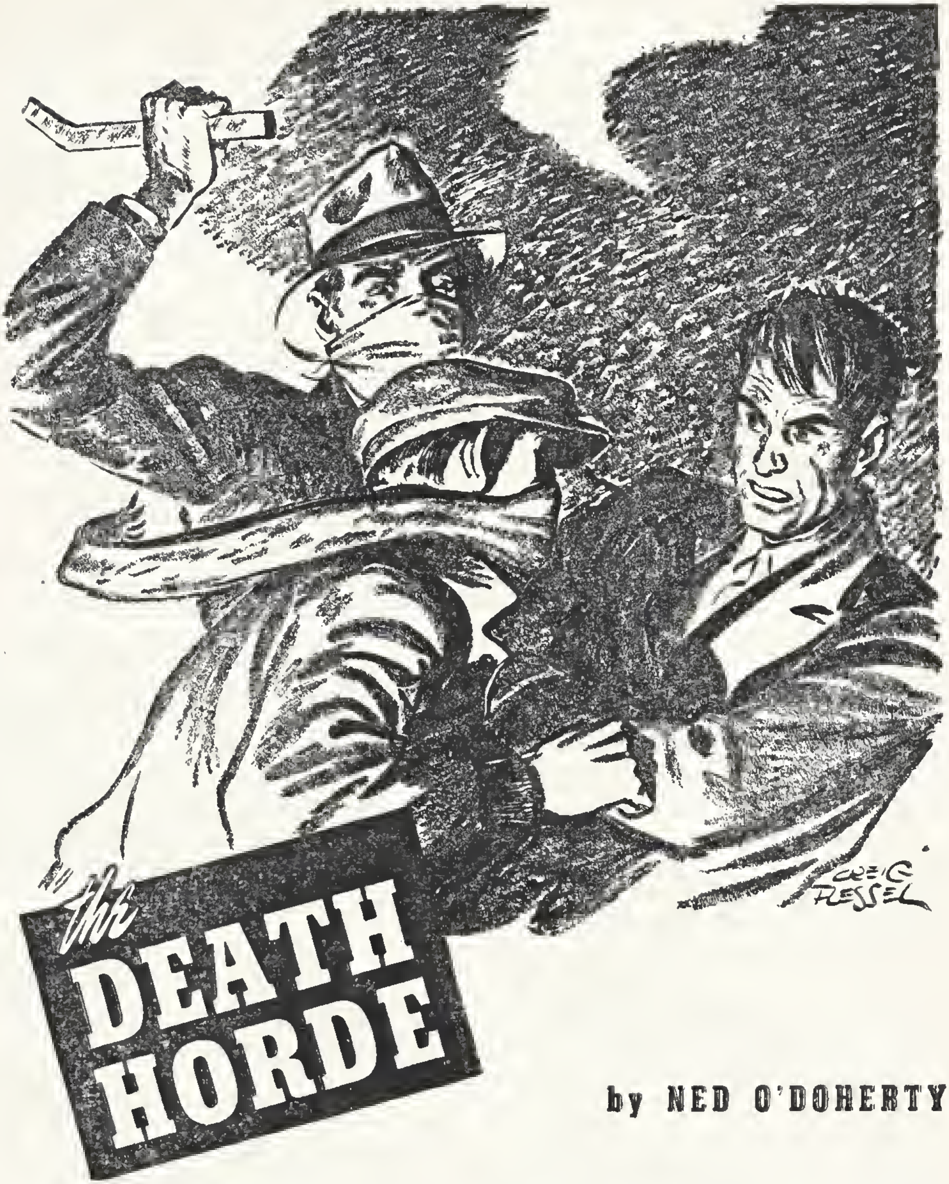
"She certainly would, Dorothy. She'd even send a man straight to his death for you."

Dorothy smiled sort of sadly. Maybe she was thinking of the Admiral. But I wasn't. Not by a damned sight I wasn't.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE, MEET—

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The Death Horde

by NED O'DOHERTY

CHAPTER I.

BULLET FOR THE DEAD!

It was one o'clock in the morning and raining. Ten dollars is a lot of money in the taxicab business these days. And ten dollars was what I had booked. Getting it had left me very tired and wet. Now, I was heading straight for the garage, and nothing was stopping me—not even if a guy wanted a flat rate to California.

I was taking the side streets to beat the traffic lights. At the next corner, I made a turn on two wheels and slapped down on the gas pedal. I took my foot off in a hurry. A

pair of glaring headlights were rushing at me hell-bent.

They shouldn't have been because this was a one-way street and very narrow. The other car was traveling against the arrow. When I say traveling, I mean shooting from side to side—not so fast, but managing to hog every inch of road space. A rum hound behind the wheel, I figured. A rum hound out for murder with his car as a weapon.

Fun for him undoubtedly; but it was no fun for me, for it left me no place to go. The rear wall of a movie house filled one side of the street, and a row of private garages the other. There was no sense in trying to get through either one of these formidable obstacles; so I did the next best thing.

I jerked the cab to a stop at the curb and prayed that the lunatic would miss me. He didn't—not quite. He tore off my left-front fender, made a sharp turn, jumped the curb across the street and plowed head-on into one of the garages.

I started to reach for a jack handle, decided I could do enough damage with my fists and raced over to where the long-hooded sports job stood.

The long hood had its nose pushed in, but the crash hadn't been sufficient to do much harm to the lug inside. That's where I came in. The door on my side was locked. I skirted around to the other side. The door opened and I went halfway in, calling this guy every name I could think of.

Names didn't bother him; in fact, he paid no attention at all. He just sat there, very still, with his chin buried in his chest. It could be that he'd banged his head slightly and passed out. I touched his shoulder and said:

"Don't stall me, pal. Come out and get your knuckle medicine."

He swayed and started to topple toward me. I moved aside to give him room. He bounced on the cushioned seat, then lay still. Light from a street lamp fell on his upturned face. He was about twenty, had blond hair and features like a girl. I touched the white face and felt cold all over. There was something wrong here! I put my fingers on his wrist to make sure.

No pulse! Dead—but why? He hadn't crashed hard enough to do any serious harm, much less to cause death.

I became conscious of sound inside the car, sound that didn't belong there. Sort of a buzzing. I looked around, but couldn't see anything in the darkness. Then something whizzed past my ear and made for the door. I swung around and had a fleeting glimpse of what looked like a horsefly, as it disappeared into the night.

It was funny about the fly being in here. It would be funnier still when Big Bill Regan got a load of this new mess. Bill is that flat-footed detective who operates out of homicide. He also happens to be my ape of a brother. The guy has been lording it over me for years. He's all right, but I imagine he was short-rationed on brains; that he was dished plain fat instead. Bill's forever beefing about yours truly getting into trouble.

Trouble's my meat, especially crime trouble. I've read books on criminology, and I have a pretty good line on this detective racket. It isn't so tough; it's just that you have to use your head. Take this young fellow with the girlish face. I didn't think he simply closed his eyes and gave up the ghost. Young

people don't die like that. But other things happen to them—things like murder!

I lit matches and looked around. I found nothing until I got to the floor. There, between his feet, was a half-emptied pack of cigarettes and some book matches. The poor guy must have been about to light a butt, when death slapped it out of his mouth. I dropped the things into my pocket.

I looked around more, examining the body for a bullet hole or a knife wound. There wasn't any. There wasn't a mark on him, except one hardly noticeable thing. It was a small bluish lump on the forehead, just above the left eye. It might have been a mosquito bite; only this wasn't the season for the pests.

I held a match up close to the lump and saw that there was a tiny black dot in its center. I found a straight pin in my coat lapel and began digging at the black dot. I got a small portion of it free and saw that it wasn't a dot, but the top of what appeared to be a hair. It was a damn tough hair, and I couldn't understand what it was doing in a guy's forehead.

I kept digging away, but it was deeply embedded and gave me trouble. I heard a car stop nearby, but was too engrossed to pay any attention. A voice behind me snapped me out of it.

"That your cab over there?"

It sounded like a cop. If so, yours truly was in for a lot of questioning, and might be accused of murder. I started to back out.

As I straightened, I heard a quick intake of breath behind me. The sound served as a warning that had me ducking to one side.

It was a good idea, but I didn't duck enough. Something cracked against the side of my head and sent a stab of pain shooting down to my toes. It hurt, but not enough to stop me. I pivoted on my heel, putting everything I had behind a right hook.

This fellow—he wasn't a cop at all—slipped neatly under the blow and was up in time to kick me in the groin. I felt my bones turn to water. The man had his coat collar up and his hat brim well down over his eyes. He was moving in again, holding something above his head. A second rap with that might easily put an end to Red Regan. It wasn't a nice thought, but I had no strength left to do anything about it.

I'd read of heroes exerting a last supreme effort and flattening all kinds of villains. But I imagine those story-book heroes were never kicked in the belly. I tried to order my muscles around, but they were on strike. The heavy thing was flashing down. I did the only thing I could do. I closed my eyes —tight.

There were no stars, no flashing of lightning, no anything. One instant I was conscious, and the next instant I wasn't. That was all. Once I thought I heard a dull explosion, but before I could be sure, I'd stopped having thoughts.

I came out of it hearing much loud talk and the sound of people running about. I opened my eyes.

One pair of shoes wasn't running around. Rain pelted the shoes. They were planted firmly beside me on the glistening wet pavement. I would have recognized those bulldog monstrosities in a million. My gaze traveled up legs, over a potbelly and stopped at a face. It was a fat face, and it had thick brows that were all bunched up between narrowed eyes.

"Hello, Bill," I said and smiled weakly.

Bill leaned toward me and seemed to be inhaling a bad odor. "Hello, be damned!" he barked. "What I ought to do is kick what's left of your dumb head all over the gutter."

"Considering my present condition—you should be able," I cracked, and Bill got real sore. He pushed off the well-meaning ambulance interne who had been patching my lumped skull and jerked me to my feet.

"You ain't hurt at all," he snapped. "What went on here?"

When he got tough like that, I wouldn't tell him the correct time. I said: "I'm still groggy from that tap on the noodle. You tell me, Brother William."

"I'll tell you, you red-headed monkey. I'll tell you that dead kid was somebody around this town. His uncle happens to be Dan Burke of the law firm of Sommers & Burke. Dan'll want quick action on this business. He'll want a fall guy, and it's liable to be you. You were the only one around. What's to stop Burke from saying it was you who shot the brains out of his precious nephew!"

"Now wait a minute, Bill. Who shot who?"

I thought Bill would take a bite out of my face. He jabbed his finger at the sports job. "In there, you ninny. Young Burke's been murdered! Somebody put a slug through his brain!"

I pushed Bill aside and poked my head inside the car. The boy was still lying where I'd last seen him. But now, there was an ugly hole through his forehead. Hardly any blood at all, but plenty of gaping hole. There was something else, something that had thoughts playing leapfrog in my brain. That bullet hole was just above the left eye. That was where the bluish lump had been. That was where I had been probing for that tiny black hair!

I backed out, trying hard not to look surprised. Bill said, "So what?"

"So nothing," I answered and let him take hold of my arm. He said:

"I get rough with you at times, Red, but you can't blame me. If you'd listened to the advice of your mother and me you wouldn't be in this lousy hack racket. You got to admit there's been nothing but trouble since you got a license."

I wouldn't admit a thing. I only knew that all my life I'd wanted to be a cop, and Bill had put the dampers on it. When I became of age, I told mom, but he already had got her ear with a line about having a doctor or a lawyer in the family. Of course, mom fell for the professional stuff. I tried to tell her I was cop all over, but mom's answer was that one cop in the family was enough. So I got sore and said I'd take the exams in spite of them. And my sweet brother had said:

"Even if you happened to make the police list, kid, I'd see to it that you were never called."

That was Bill all over. He'd beat you if he had to use a stick to do it. What did I do? I quit school and got a hack license. Mon is still trying to live down the disgrace with the neighbors.

Bill was saying: "You tell me exactly what happened, Red, and I'll let you scram out of here. Else I'll be forced to take you in and heave you in the can on suspicion. Which is one thing I'd hate doing to my own flesh and blood."

How the guy could say that and

keep a straight face I don't know. Why, the big blubber would like nothing better, only I guess he was afraid of mom. So I talked and said nothing.

I told him about the car crashing and my finding young Burke behind the wheel; but I didn't bother to mention the bluish lump or the fact that the boy was dead before that slug was fired into his brain. I didn't tell Bill of these things, because if I could beat him at his own detecting game, it would be aces. Besides, this case interested me. I intended to look around on my own hook.

"How do you explain the lump on your skull?" Bill demanded.

"That's easy. In backing out of the car, I cracked it against the door jamb. My nut is weak that way."

"Your nut is weak in every way." Ball snapped and turned on his heel.

CHAPTER II.
THE CANARY CLUB.

I threw the gear into first and let in the clutch. A few blocks away, I stopped under a street light and dug out the cigarettes and book matches that I had found in the murder car. The butts were a popular brand and didn't mean a thing. Ditto the matches. I started to give both the heave-o, but checked the movement and stared at the book matches.

There was an advertisement on the outside of the cover. It said:

DINE AND DANCE AT THE
CANARY CLUB
No Cover. No Minimum.

It didn't follow that young Burke had been a customer of the Canary Club. He could have picked up those matches most any place. Still, there was a chance that he did get

them at the Canary. And I'd heard of the place. I'd heard that its owner, Steve Whitney, was a guy who had blown in from Chicago, some years ago, and was said to be tough. Also, I knew that the Canary paid to cabbies twenty-five per cent of the "take" from customers they steered that way. Which made the place a sort of clip joint. The Canary is located on Fifty-fourth Street over near Third Ave. What could I lose by having a look-see?

The Canary Club had a canopy jutting out from what once had been a respectable private house. I pulled up behind a cab that was parked at the curb and started to get out. Its driver, a tall, string-bean individual, came up and turned blazing eyes on me.

"You can't hack here, chiseler. This line's strictly private."

His nose was long and lapped down over an ugly gash of a mouth. His eyes were small and beady, the rattish kind. I didn't like his face, his talk, or the guy, himself. I said:

"I want no part of your crummy hack line. My beat is Brooklyn. What I want is a commission card from Steve Whitney."

I started away, and the lug yelled after me: "Don't be too long, or you're liable to have four flat tires when you come out."

"Do that," I told him, "and I'll flatten that porker of yours."

Inside, I told an overpainted hat-check girl that I wanted to see Whitney. She pressed a pearl button, and a little later I saw a dark-looking fellow making his way across the tiny dance floor. He was all shoulders, wore a phony smile, and his Tux had trouble keeping itself wrapped around bulging muscles.

"I'm Whitney," he said. "What's on your mind, son?"

I told him, and he took a card from his pocket and scribbled something on it. He handed it to me saying: "I need a couple of boys who hack Brooklyn, but, remember, this place is strictly on the up and up. You bring a customer in, and he gets an honest tab. Then the next night you come around and collect twenty-five percent of what was spent. Suit you?"

I grinned. "If you happened to pad a tab, I wouldn't get sore, Mr. Whitney. It would mean more commission for me."

He winked. "You sound like a right guy, redhead. So here's something else: I run a little bird cage and dice upstairs. You bring in anybody who wants to take a flier along those lines, and your commission is forty percent of the take."

"Gee, that's great—" I began; then I saw that the long-nosed cabby had come in and was motioning to Whitney. Whitney went over and Long-nose began jabbering in his ear. I guess it concerned me, because Whitney's eyes narrowed on me and his expression became very unfriendly.

It suddenly struck me that Long-nose might have checked on my identification card outside in the cab. He might have connected the Regan name with that of Big Bill. If that were the case, Whitney wasn't going to think it smart to have a detective's brother knowing so much about his activities. I beelined for the door and was surprised that nobody stopped me.

I got away from there fast, and was beginning to feel healthy again, when I happened to glance in the rear-view mirror. The other cab was right on my tail. I fed gas, but Long-nose must have had a better motor in the belly of that load of his. I roared along Second Avenue and made a dime-turn into the next street running east. Some block I'd picked—factory buildings on one side and row of deserted tenements on the other. Grand spot for a murder, I thought; and I didn't feel so good.

Long-nose shot past and cut me off sharply. To avoid a crash I turned with him and wound up with the nose of my hack gently kissing a factory wall. Long-nose stayed put, but two gorillas from the back were out fast and running toward me.

They were of the bruiser variety and were all muffled up so that their faces were hidden. I piled out, myself, and one of them said:

"Steve made a mistake. We'll take that card."

I didn't argue. I handed over the card. The fellow who took it said: "Thanks, Regan," and clipped me a hard right on the mouth.

I bounced off the wall and came out fighting. It was a waste of time. These babies knew a thing or two about rough and tumble, and one of them had a jack handle, just to make it interesting. I got in a few decent punches, but I guess I took more than I was able to dish out. Anyhow, all of a sudden, I found myself flat on my back. I started to get up, got smacked with the jack handle and sat down again.

One of these hoods gathered up a handful of my hair and yanked back my head. "Can't you take it, Red?" he asked friendlylike and put everything he had behind a smashing right uppercut. It picked me up and threw me over on my face.

Some kicks in the ribs helped the stars shine brighter; then one of them said in my ear: "That's only a sample, Red. Blabber one word

about Steve Whitney's place to that thick-skulled brother of yours, and we'll see that you and your cab get a call to the bottom of the river."

After a while I got up and staggered toward my hack. I should have been sore and swearing revenge, but I was too full of pain for all that. I simply was thinking that perhaps the detective business wasn't such a racket after all.

I sneaked into the house without awaking mom, and made the bathroom the hard way. My head went under the cold shower and stayed there until it began to feel half normal again. Then I crept into bed, groaning and grunting as though I were eighty years old.

When I came downstairs in the morning, Bill was ears-deep in a mess of ham and eggs.

No sense in trying to get a word out of Bill while he was eating; so I drank two cups of black coffee and waited. When finally he did come up for air, his tone was surprisingly cheerful.

"Well, kid, I've been doing things. After we cleaned up that mess last night, I went to break the sad news to Dan Burke. He and Jeff Sommers were waiting."

"Waiting for what?" I asked, and Bill ignored the question.

"Both of them appeared greatly shocked when I told them about the kid's death." He winked wisely. "You notice, Red, I said 'appeared'?"

"Yeah, I noticed. Why?"

"Because I found out a few things. For instance, when the boy's father died, he left a pile of money to his son. But the uncle was in complete control of it until the young fellow reached his twenty-first birthday. And young Burke would have been twenty-one in a few months. But—and get this—if anything happened to the boy before he became of age, Uncle Dan was to become the sole heir! What does that add up to, Red?"

"The way you put it, it adds up to two strikes on the uncle. But I've read books on criminology, and they all state that when a case adds up too easily, it usually doesn't work out that way."

"You and your dopey books," Bill sneered. I let him get away with it and said:

"You said Burke and Sommers were waiting around for something. What was it?"

Bill grinned. "The boy hadn't been home for three days. They were waiting for him, but he didn't show up. Only he should have, especially when Burke claims he pair fifty thousand dollars—out of the kid's own dough, of course—to see that he did. But it seems the kidnapers found it easier and safer to knock off the lad, after they'd collected the fifty grand!"

Bill expected this last to knock me off the chair, and it very nearly did. But just to fool him, I pretended not to be too excited. I clicked my tongue.

"Who'd want to kidnap him?"

"I understand the boy gambled a lot—and lost, mostly. He was forever hitting up the uncle for money to pay off. The last one was for five thousand dollars, and Dan refused to come across. Said the boy had to learn his lesson sometime. Shortly after that, he was snatched. Jeff Sommers found the ransom note shoved under the front door of the Burke house. It demanded fifty thousand, saying that Burke should put it in a bag and give it to Sommers. Sommers was to get in his car and drive up and down a certain street until he was headed off by the contact car. These directions were carried out to the letter. Burke

thinks his nephew was grabbed for welshing on that five-grand marker, and that the ante was raised to fifty thousand dollars for the trouble caused. After the money was collected, the kidnapers were forced to murder young Burke because he knew them and could identify them later."

Thoughts were crowding up in my brain. I could see now how those Canary Club book matches and the gambler, Steve Whitney, connected up. Young Burke must have been gambling in Whitney's upstairs joint and went overboard. When he welshed, Whitney had him snatched. I could see, now, why Whitney had become so upset when he discovered that I was Big Bill's brother.

"You got the ransom note?" I asked Bill.

"Yes, but Burke wants it back. Claims he's going to call in the G-men, but I don't think he will. I think Dan Burke would be tickled to death if this case died a natural death—fast. I think he wanted his nephew's money. He hired some hoods to grab the boy, knock him off and have it appear like a kidnaping. He saw to it that the note directed Jeff Sommers to deliver the money so he'd have proof that it actually was delivered. Which I have no doubt it was—for a job of murder. It was a cheap price to pay in order to collect what remained."

It could be there was a lot in Bill's deduction. Possibly, Burke had been approached by Whitney for the five thousand dollars owed him. The uncle might have refused to pay, but offered fifty thousand if Whitney would murder the boy. Fine, all this reasoning, but there was one flaw. That flaw was the fact that young Burke was dead before that bullet was sent crashing into his brain.

Bill didn't know this, but I did. I'd felt for pulse and there hadn't been any. It was this angle that stopped me cold. Who had tailed the death car and fired a bullet into the head of a man who was already dead? Had it been done to obliterate that bluish lump on the boy's forehead? Why? And that horsefly that had been buzzing around inside the death car. Where did that fit in? Fit in? Why it didn't fit in at all. It was a crazy thought, and it just goes to show how this business was beginning to get me down. If I weren't careful, I'd have horseflies buzzing around in my bonnet.

Bill had his hat and coat on and was at the door. He came back, taking a piece of folded paper from his pocket. "You expect to be rolling your hack around Seventy-fourth Street later on?"

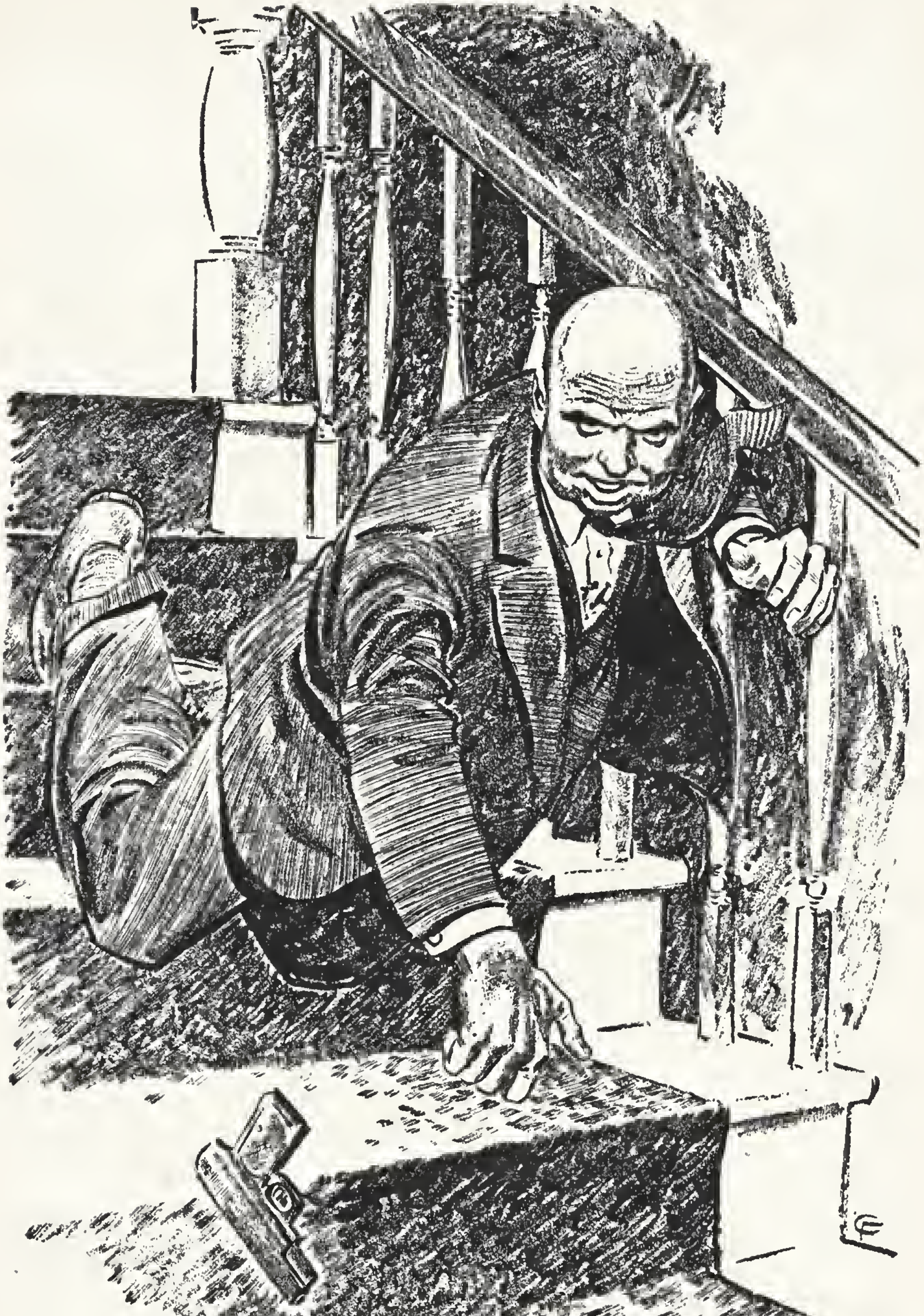
"I usually get up that way, Bill. Why?"

He dropped the paper on the table. "That's the ransom note. Burke wanted it returned, so he'd have it on tap when the G-men show up. I haven't had time to study it very carefully, but if Burke is sincere about calling in the G-men, a copy of their report on the paper will be good enough for me. I'd consider it a favor, Red, if you'd stop by the Burke place and give him the note."

CHAPTER III.

MURDER ON WINGS.

A couple of calls had kept me busy, and it was dark before I turned my cab uptown toward Seventy-fourth Street. On the way up I heard the newshawks shouting about the Burke murder and the fifty-thousand-dollar ransom that had been paid. I figured it would have been better if the papers hadn't been given the story for a while; but I



Burke stood swaying; then he went down the stairs, head over heels.

suppose it was too big to keep hidden from the police reporters.

The Burke place was one of the few old-fashioned private houses that still remained standing on Seventy-fourth Street, dwarfed as it was amidst the towering apartments that hemmed it on all sides. There was another cab parked at the curb. I pulled in behind it and piled out.

No lights showed through the front windows. I ran up the stone stoop and yanked an antiquated bell-pull. I heard it ringing somewhere inside, waited and tried again. No business. The thought of making this trip up here for nothing was irritating; I grabbed the doorknob and rattled it good and proper. It turned and the door swung in.

Inside in the hall, I had a vague sensation of dread. It might have been the heavy, ominous silence or the strong odor of dust that caught at my throat like human hands. I had trouble shaking off the strange feeling.

To the left were stairs that led above. Straight ahead, at the rear of the hall, I saw a thin shaft of light coming from beneath a closed door. I took a single step in that direction and stopped dead.

The feeling of dread was back, more pronounced than ever! I wanted to turn and dash out of this musty house into the fresh air. I'm not the type who runs away from things, but this house—there was something about it that seemed to weigh down on a man.

Maybe I was turning sour. Who? Red Regan? Not on your life. Besides, I had that note to deliver. Bill had said it was important. I started down the hall.

I listened outside the door, heard no sound and knocked gently. No answer. I turned the knob and let the door swing in of its own volition.

The room was huge, high-ceilinged, with row upon row of books taking up most of the wall space. Carved elephants stood in a line on the mantel, and over a settee there was a silver-embroidered Calcutta cloth. I had taken a special interest in such things while in school; had read many books on the subject. I knew that the cloth and the elephants had originated in India. In addition to these, there was a thick rug on the floor, some heavy chairs scattered about and a flat-top desk over in one corner.

The man sitting behind the desk held a heavy automatic in his right hand. It was lined directly on my midsection! He was middle-aged, overfat and his bald pate shone as though it had been polished diligently. He kept running a red-pointed tongue around thick, wet lips. I didn't like the idea of the gun. I said:

"It might go off, Mr. Burke. How about putting it down. I came here simply—"

"Shut up!" His voice hissed like water on fire. "I know why you're here. When he didn't hear from the other rat, Whitney sent you!"

I gulped. "There must be some mistake, Mr. Burke. I don't know of any other rat, and Steve Whitney didn't send me—"

Burke was on his feet, his eyes blazing wildly in his head. He came across the room until he was directly before me. Those eyes! They seemed struggling to escape from their sockets. There was madness in them!

"I'll fix Whitney!" Burke was screaming. "I'll wipe his whole rotten mob from the face of the earth!"

The events of the past few days must have cracked the man's mind. It would be useless to attempt reasoning with a lunatic. I dived for the gun in his hand.

The man was as agile as a tiger. He side-stepped, jerking the gun beyond my reach. I stumbled. The gun barrel cracked against my head. I went down and rolled over on my back. Dan Burke bent over and pressed the automatic against my temple.

"I could do it this way," he said. "It would be easy and quick for you. But I don't want it that way. I have a better way for you to die—a way that is neither easy nor quick! Steve Whitney, too, will not die easy."

He gathered up my coat front and jerked me to my feet. I was still pretty groggy from that rap on the head. He jammed the gun muzzle into the small of my back.

"Get going! Out into the hall and upstairs."

There was nothing I could do but obey. In the hall, he touched a button, and light came from a single bulb. We marched along the hall and started up the stairs. I was trying to squeeze thought between the shooting pains in my head. Burke had been sitting behind that desk, apparently waiting for someone to put in an appearance. He'd mistaken me for one of Steve Whitney's boys, which proved that he knew of Whitney, had perhaps been connected with him in the kidnap-murder of his nephew.

Perhaps Whitney had demanded more money for his end than had been agreed upon, had perhaps sent one of his men to collect. Burke had said something about another person. And then I suddenly remembered the cab that had been parked outside at the curb. Long-nose, the cabby! If Whitney had sent him to collect, what had Dan Burke done with the man?

We were on the landing of the floor above. Burke was prodding my back with the gun. "That door ahead, you. Open it, quick. And get inside!"

I had my hand on the knob. What this madman had in store for me I didn't know. My knees began to tremble. I turned the knob and pushed the door open a crack. Sound reached my ears, terrible, horrible sound! It was like the buzzing of a huge horsefly, only magnified a thousand times. Burke's hot breath was on my neck.

"Inside, I tell you! Inside, or by heavens—"

He pushed me against the door. It flew in. A single bulb in the ceiling threw a dim, yellow light. What I saw froze the blood in my veins.

A man, or what was left of him, lay on the floor bound and gagged. Some distance away lay a cap—a cabby's uniform cap. It was the only way I had of knowing that the man must be Long-nose. He was doubled up so that his knees touched his chin. His face, neck, head and all other exposed parts of his body were a puffed, purplish mass of unrecognizable flesh! Tiny winged devils crawled over every inch of the unfortunate cab driver's body. Hundreds more of the creatures flew about the room.

The buzzing sound was a terrible din in my ears. Horseflies I had thought them at first; horseflies like the one I'd seen flying about in the car with the body of young Burke. But they weren't flies. They were waspish, fat-bodied bees that made the small room thick with their presence. There was no movement from the man on the floor. He undoubt-

edly had died a horrible death—stung to death by hundreds of bees!

And Dan Burke had chosen a similar death for me. He was forcing me into the room, the gun deep in my back. A bee stung me on the neck, another on the cheek, the hand—even through the sleeve of my coat. I screamed and kicked out at the madman who would lock me in this room of horror!

As I fought, he swore and slapped the gun barrel across my cheek! Blood gushed forth. I landed a hard right on his jaw and sent him heel-dancing out into the hall. I was after him, screaming with pain, as the bees became thick about my head.

Burke stood by the stairs. He raised his gun and lined it on my chest. I came on. Better to die with a slug through the chest than this other way! I knew I could never reach the man before he pressed trigger. I closed my eyes and waited for death to free me from the torture of the stinging bees!

A shot exploded, but no lead entered my body. My eyes snapped open. Burke had turned and was looking down into the hall below. I followed his gaze and saw Steve Whitney and his two henchmen standing under the light down there.

All three held revolvers. No word was spoken. They fired simultaneously and flashing tongues of flame licked up at Dan Burke. He shuddered as the lead plowed into his chest.

The bees were all about me. I tried to beat them off and kept my eyes glued on the scene before me. I was certain those bullets had entered Burke's chest, but the man was still on his feet. He moved forward, started down the stairs.

He traveled slowly, one hand on the rail, the other pumping lead from the automatic he held. Steve Whitney and his men fired again and again. Burke kept moving down the stairs. There was blood on his face, on his white shirt front; but there was no stopping him. His gun barked like an angry dog.

Suddenly, one of Whitney's men dropped his gun and took hold of his stomach. Slowly, he toppled to the floor. His companion followed immediately, with a gory hole where his right eye had been. Whitney kept pressing trigger, but his face had become a white mask of terror, now.

Burke moved like a death-dealing automaton. What held up the man I don't know. He must have been dead on his feet. Still, lead burst from the automatic!

Suddenly, Whitney stopped firing. He turned, took one step toward the front door. Then he tripped and went out on his face.

Burke stood swaying on the stairs. Then he folded up and went down the steps head over heels. I staggered to the landing and started down.

I lashed out in all directions to protect myself from the stinging bees, but no sooner were they off one part of my body than they were back on another. I yelled out in agony, half stumbling, half falling down the stairs. If I could only make the street—

I did, but it did little good. The bees were at me like a thousand devils. I raced down the street with the droning horde swarming about my head. I screamed for help, but the few people who did see my plight gave me a wide berth. I was gasping for breath, but when I opened my mouth, bees flew in and stung my tongue. I was covered

with the murderous devils. When I grasped a handful and flung them from me, others quickly took their place.

My eyes were closed lumps of pain! My face, neck and hands were raw meat. I fell on my face on the cold pavement. Dimly I heard the scream of a police siren. I heard running feet on the pavement. I forced open my swollen eyes. I saw Big Bill. He was racing toward me. He had flaming newspapers in his hands. Two uniformed cops pounded at his heels, carrying more burning papers. I tried to call to Bill, but no words came forth. I passed out.

CHAPTER IV.

REVELATION.

It was nice and quiet in the hospital. I wasn't able to move much, but I was content to be still. My body felt like a balloon, but it might have been all the bandages that gave that impression. A white-coated doctor came in and beamed down on me.

"We removed some two hundred discarded stingers from your body," he informed me and grinned his delight. I gave him a Bronx cheer by way of answer. The doctor went out.

The way I figured things, Dan Burke had made a deal with Whitney to kidnap and murder the nephew. But when Jeff Sommers went to pay the fifty thousand dollars, as supposed ransom, Burke tailed him to make certain there was no slip-up. Undoubtedly, he didn't trust Steve Whitney and feared a double cross. Which was exactly what happened. Whitney grabbed the fifty grand and released the boy, seeing no sense in letting himself in for a murder rap.

Dan Burke had been prepared for this. The Calcutta cloth and the carved elephants I'd seen in his library showed that he was interested in things of India; perhaps he had visited the country. That would also account for the bees; I'd read that the vicious pests of Northeastern India are known to attack a human for no apparent reason.

And if Burke knew India, it followed that he'd be familiar with the many deadly poisons that originate there. So he came prepared to murder the boy if Whitney failed. In some way, he managed to poison the stinger of one of the bees. He had it with him when his nephew was released. He followed him, stopped his car and spoke to the boy. Then he left, making sure to release the

poisoned bee before closing the door. The bee stung young Burke, injecting the poison into his forehead.

Burke followed, saw the car crash and felt certain that he had committed a crime that would defy detection. But then I appeared on the scene and immediately noticed the bluish mark. That wasn't so good. Burke began to realize that his murder method wasn't so perfect; that the poisoned bee might easily be traced to him. So he sapped me and fired a bullet into the boy's brain to prevent the actual cause of death from being discovered.

Everything added up perfectly. I'd have to remember all the details so I could explain to Big Bill. I grinned at the thought of Bill. I could just picture the big blubber hanging on my every word. Well, at least it should prove to him that I had some very excellent detective material in my make-up. Maybe I wouldn't rub it in on the poor guy so much at that. After all, I suppose he saved my life when he scared off the bees with those burning newspapers.

Speak of the devil— The door opened and Bill came pounding across the floor. A tall, dignified man followed at his heels. The dignified gent had a round smooth face and thick wavy hair that was slightly sprinkled with gray. Bill smiled down at me.

"How you doing, kid?"

"Great!" I burst out and went right into my story. Bill listened intently, but I noticed the smile never left his face. I thought it odd, because the big boy usually looks very glum when I'm telling him things he doesn't know. When I'd finished, the dignified gent burst out laughing. I didn't like it.

"Couldn't you park the hyena outside?" I demanded of Bill.

Bill's expression became benevolent. "You've thought up a nice case for yourself, Red; only you missed on one or two very important points. For instance, you ask me to park this gentleman outside. And I know you don't mean that. For this man happens to be none other than Mr. Dan Burke!"

"What?" I roared and bounced up to a sitting position. "He can't be! I saw him shot down back there in the house—"

"Your trouble," interrupted Bill, "was the fact that you never saw either Dan Burke or his partner, Jeff Sommers. The man you saw killed was Sommers. You'd mistaken him for Mr. Burke."

Excruciating pain shot through every fiber of my body, and I was glad to let Bill ease me back on the pillow.

"So you see," he went on, "sommers was the one who used the poisoned bee to murder young Burke. It was he who knew all about things from India. He'd brought the bees from there—also the carved elephants and the Calcutta cloth. He had been permitted to live in the Burke home, which is how he happened to have the bees in that room upstairs."

"But why should he want to murder the boy, Bill?"

"Because as a trusted partner of Mr. Burke's, he had access to the young fellow's money. He'd been helping himself to it and going overboard in the market. The boy would have been twenty-one, shortly, and a showdown would be in order. And Jeff Sommers was into the money for forty thousand dollars. He knew young Burke needed five thousand dollars; so he talked him into disappearing and pretending he was

kidnaped. Whitney, who stood to gain the five grand owed him, helped out by allowing the boy to hide out in his gambling joint."

"But the ransom note was for fifty thousand!" I put in.

"Correct, Red. We took the note from your pocket when they brought you in here, and had it examined in the police laboratory. Sommers had raised the $5000 to $50000. He met young Burke, handed over the five grand and kept the rest for himself. Then he let the poisoned bee loose in the car, so that the boy wouldn't be around later to squawk when he learned that *fifty* thousand dollars had been paid off."

"And I suppose when Steve Whitney read in the newspapers about the murder and the fifty thousand, he got on Sommers' tail and demanded more money for being crossed up?"

Bill nodded. "Mr. Burke was in the room when Sommers got the call, which forced Sommers to agree to Whitney's demands. But as soon as he hung up, he bound and gagged Mr. Burke and put him in the cellar. Then he waited for Whitney; but, instead, Steve sent up that poor cabby to collect for him. Then you marched in, and you know what happened after that."

"Your mistake certainly was my good fortune," Dan Burke said, and burst out laughing. Bill chimed in, and they had a grand time for themselves.

Suddenly the door opened and mom came striding in. She made straight for Bill and threw rights and lefts from every conceivable angle. Bill ducked, bobbed and weaved, but mom got him in a corner and what she did to him was a delight to my puffed eyes.

"Let my baby get all bit up, will you?" she yelled, and Bill stopped an uppercut.

Dan Burke tried to separate them and got clipped on the ear. I laughed till the tears rolled down my bandages. I doubled up in a knot and roared at the top of my lungs. It hurt, sure—but it certainly was worth it. This was one time Bill had beat me in a game of wits. But, boy, what a price he paid!



DEAD MAN'S MESSAGE

by JACK STORM

Detective Tim Crandall occupied one half of a seat in the smoking car. His companion was a wizen-faced, ratty-eyed little mug known as Slim Dowling. Crandall struck a match and held it to Slim's cigarette. He looked down at the man's wrist.

"Cuff too tight, Slim?" he asked. Slim was a human guttersnipe, but Crandall couldn't get tough with him. Slim was headed for prison and the electric chair, without the slightest chance of escaping that doom.

"They'd be too tight if they were around my little finger," Slim muttered. "And don't get me wrong, copper. Sure, the jury gave me the hot seat. But they haven't pulled the switch yet, and me—I'm not

going to ride the lightning. Not me, because I'm too smart, see? Now, will you shut up? I don't have to listen to you jabber."

Crandall shook his head sadly. They were all like this on their way to prison. But when the time came for that final parade to start, they changed. Slim was no different. Then Crandall frowned. Slim had plenty of connections. Was he intimating in a mildly boastful way that there would be an attempt made to spring him? That couldn't be done in prison, for no man had ever busted out of Death Row. Which left this trip in the smoking car as Slim's last and only opportunity for freedom.

Crandall pursed his lips and began studying the various passengers in the coach. He nudged the gun under his left armpit with his elbow. If anything happened, he wasn't going to be asleep when it started.

The train made a local stop; but no one got into the smoker and Crandall breathed easier again. There was a round mirror at the head of the coach, and he could see a reflection of the door behind him. He kept watching it and also the door in front. Thirty minutes from now he'd be at the prison. If things were to happen, they'd come fast!

Slim had his eyes closed and was slumped in the seat. Suddenly Crandall inserted a key in the handcuff. Slim sat up with a jerk and a gasp of astonishment. But Crandall was only unlocking the cuff around his own wrist. He clamped this to an iron bar which composed part of the seat. Then his right hand slowly moved toward his left lapel. In the mirror, he watched two men saunter into the car, light cigarettes and lean too nonchalantly against the water cooler. The door opened and a third man came in. Crandall looked at the other end of the car. A fourth man had entered that door and kept one hand deep in the side pocket of his coat. It was coming all right. They were going to try and spring Slim!

"What'sa idea?" Slim demanded. "Hey, copper—what's goin' on?"

"Quiet, you little rat," Crandall said softly, "or I'll put a lump on your head with my gun butt. You're not leaving—no matter how many of your pals show."

Slim looked queerly astonished. He turned his head. The blood drained out of his face. He tried to get up, but the handcuff held him fast. He began yelling at the top of his voice. Then the thugs went into action! They whipped out guns. Crandall jumped up, his own weapon in his fist. He had two angles to cover—both ends of the train. Only one man held the farther door and he fired at him, point-blank! The thug was wheeled around as the slug crashed into his shoulder. His gun fell into the aisle.

Passengers screamed and scrambled under their seats for safety. Crandall turned quickly, but he held his fire. A frantic woman passenger was screaming and standing directly in the way of Crandall's aim. That didn't prevent the thugs from acting. A minor detail like hitting a bystander meant nothing to them. Their guns opened up! Crandall felt a bolt of lightning strike his arm. He heard the smacking of the heavy slugs against human flesh. Wizened, little Slim Dowling slumped against him. Crandall looked down. At least four slugs had struck the killer in the chest!

He shouted to the woman to duck, but she was too frightened to move, now. Crandall snapped a shot over her head. It missed the retreating

thugs, but it startled them enough so that they quickly backed out on the platform. The air hissed as one of them pulled the emergency cord. The train jerked, throwing Crandall off balance. Slim rolled down off the seat at the same time and Crandall tripped over him. He went sprawling in the aisle.

When he got to his feet again, he saw the thugs running across the right of way toward a car waiting for them on the highway only twenty-five feet distant. Crandall smashed a window in the coach and began shooting. One of the crooks tripped and fell. The others picked him up hastily, dragged him to the car and helped him inside. Then they were away with a grinding of gears, audible even inside the train.

Crandall cursed softly, picked up Slim and examined him. Then he quickly unlocked the handcuffs, lifted the small crook in his arms and carried him down the aisle. An excited conductor bolted into the car.

"There's a Pullman—next car," Crandall croaked. "Open the compartment. Hurry—this man is dying, but he may be able to tell me something."

Someone grabbed Crandall's arm. He turned his head. A slender, spectacled youth moved closer.

"I'm a reporter—what happened? Who is this guy you're holding? Who killed him?"

Crandall turned away angrily, kicked the smoking-car door shut in the reporter's face and crossed the platform into the Pullman. The conductor had the compartment door open. Crandall gently placed his bloody burden on the wide seat, loosened Slim's collar and then barked at the conductor.

"Scram! What this guy has to tell me is private."

The conductor backed out, but he didn't close the door. Passengers were clustered around the entrance. Crandall seemed to pay no attention to them. He knelt beside Slim, raised his head and implored him to speak.

"They gunned you out because you knew something," Crandall shouted. "Who sent them? Who is behind it, Slim? Speak up—it's your last chance to do the right thing. Who were— What? Say that again. Again, Slim, I couldn't hear you. Yes . . . yes, that's it! All the details! Fast, now—you haven't got long."

He put his ear against Slim's lips. Then he withdrew his arm from

Slim's shoulder. The little crook dropped back, his head lolling limply off the edge of the seat. Crandall arose, his face set in harsh lines. He strode toward the door, pushed the curious passengers away and locked the compartment.

"Beat it!" he told everyone. "Haven't you ever seen a dead man before?"

"Officer . . . officer!" It was that pesty reporter again. "I'm from the *News-Dispatch*. My name is Cole Jackson. I didn't recognize you at first. Crandall, you've got to give me the low-down. It's a scoop—a sensation."

Crandall grabbed the reporter by the collar and shook him. "I'm not saying a word. If you wanted news, why didn't you interview those killers? That would have been something. Now get away from me!"

"Listen, Crandall," the reporter shouted. "You can't talk to me like this. My job's as important as yours. I won't stand for—"

"He stopped talking because Crandall's massive hand suddenly was plastered against his mouth. The reporter was thrown into one of the Pullman seats. Crandall walked angrily back to the smoker. It wasn't just the fact that his prisoner had been practically shot from under his nose, but Slim was a man—a human being. He had been doomed to death, but that didn't mean some gang of mugs could handle the job for the State. This was just as much murder as the rotten killing Slim had done. Crandall's arm ached. He removed his coat, ripped his sleeve along its entire length and tied a clean handkerchief around the wound.

Five hours later Crandall walked out of police headquarters. There was no longer a gun reposing in his shoulder holster, and his little leather badge case was empty. He'd been fired!

Not because his prisoner had been murdered and the killers had escaped, but because Crandall refused to admit that Slim Dowling had talked and named his killers. Not even the police commissioner's promises or threats made Crandall tell what Slim had said, or even acknowledge that the dying man had even talked at all.

Two uniformed sergeants, longtime pals of Crandall's, looked the other way when they passed. Crandall grimaced and shrugged his shoulders. That hurt more than the commissioner's lashing tongue. He walked over to a newsstand and bought a paper. His picture was plastered in the middle of the front page. The story by-line was by Cole Jackson, and it wasn't particularly praising. In fact it called Crandall everything from a yellow louse to a welching, hard-headed fool. He threw the paper into the gutter.

"How are you—ex-cop?" someone said.

Crandall stopped and turned around. He knew the voice. That nosy reporter was grinning at him from a car that rolled slowly along beside the curb. Crandall walked over to it, and Jackson hastily locked the door and rolled the window up all but a couple of inches.

"Listen, you mealy-mouthed little brat," Crandall roared. "You're responsible for this whole business. Well, put this in your paper. If Slim Dowling ever told me anything, I'll keep it to myself. They could put me in Slim's place—on his way to the chair—and I wouldn't talk. I'm no sap, and understand this—the next time I see your stupid face, I'll push it in."

He wheeled and strode down the street, his eyes smoldering with rage. He got used to the publicity during the next forty-eight hours; but nothing could make him shrug off the obvious contempt with which every patrolman, every detective, betrayed.

There were a couple of more stormy sessions in the commissioner's office, but Crandall merely stood there, immune to every persuasion; every threat. They couldn't do any more to him than what they'd done already. Nobody could prove Slim Dowling talked before he died. Crandall was sure of his grounds and stood them valiantly.

On the second night after Slim Dowling's murder, Crandall walked the dreary streets near his home. It was drizzling and raw. His home was a neat little bungalow which he'd inherited from an aunt. Crandall didn't need a whole house, but he liked the seclusion it gave him. He was grateful that he had no relatives who would suffer because of his dismissal.

He ambled past the driveway heading for the front door. At that moment a car turned the corner, a hundred yards from the house. Its headlights threw a yellow beam which darted across the driveway. Crandall had a momentary glimpse of a car, parked in the darkness. Suddenly it shot forward, a big classy-looking job with a motor he hadn't been able to hear a dozen feet away.

Crandall went down on one knee. His right hand streaked for his shoulder holster. He had a gun there, a cheap nickel-plated weapon he'd been in the habit of keeping in the house. There was a burst of flame from the window of the car! Crandall winced as a slug buzzed past his ear and slammed against the bungalow steps. He didn't shoot until he had a target. When the killer leaned out of the window, trying to see whether or not he'd hit Crandall, the ex-detective yanked the trigger. The gunman didn't utter a sound, just draped himself out of the window, hanging there like something on the family wash line.

But he wasn't done. The driver started shooting and Crandall saw the car begin to gather speed. He started a crouching race beside it. The driver couldn't shoot at him very well because the body of his teammate blocked the window on Crandall's side.

The detective managed to grab the rear-door handle and haul himself up on the running board. He opened the door and thrust his gun through. That was the first inkling the driver had that he had company.

"Keep right on driving," Crandall snapped. "Both hands on the wheel all the time, or I'll blow the back of your head off!"

Crandall climbed into the rear seat, put the muzzle of his gun against the driver's head and kept it there until they left the neighborhood.

"Turn right at the next intersection, Crandall ordered. "Then pull off the road and stop."

The driver obeyed. Crandall forced him to turn around, and he grinned tightly when he had a look at the man's face.

"Well, if it isn't one of Mike McBane's little trigger boys. How come you were trying to rub me out? You know I'm nothing but an ex-cop."

"It was a mistake," the driver grasped at the straw Crandall offered. "We thought you was some-

body else. Honest, Crandall, we got nothing against you."

Crandall settled back in the seat, kept the gun aimed at the driver's head and gave some terse instructions. "Drive me to McBane's place and not via Philadelphia, either. I know he's holed up in town. Don't give me any argument. Either you drive, or you'll flop all over the seat like your pal. I want to see McBane."

The driver took a quick look at Crandall's face and decided he'd better obey. Crandall didn't appear as though he was fooling. The car headed uptown and then due east toward the river. Crandall touched the driver's neck with his gun butt.

"Stop here! Pull under that tree and point out the place where McBane is hiding—unless you'd rather escort me there personally. I don't think McBane would like you for that."

The driver gulped. "It's that big house over there, right near the river bank. The guy who owns it is in South America, and one of McBane's boys got a job as caretaker; so Mike just moved in. Listen, copper, don't tell him I took you here. That guy will gun me out if you do. I . . . I'd rather take a rap for pumping lead at you."

Crandall grinned and raised his inverted gun. "A bargain, pal."

The gun butt came down and the driver slumped behind the wheel. Crandall climbed out of the car, closed the door softly and began moving in toward the big house. On sudden thought, he turned back and lifted a gun from the unconscious driver. He thrust this into his belt and then resumed a careful approach to McBane's hide-out.

He was crouched behind a thick tree trunk, estimating his chances of getting inside, when he saw the headlights of another car turn into the long driveway. Crandall drew his gun and waited. The car pulled up to the front of the place. One man got out, and, somehow, he seemed familiar even in the darkness. He marched up on the porch and rang the bell. The door opened and Crandall's jaw sagged. It was Cole Jackson, the reporter on the *News-Dispatch!* The slender youth waved a mock salute to the man who let him in, shoved his hat to the back of his head and disappeared as the door closed.

Crandall moved forward a little more boldly, now. McBane and his men would be concentrating their attentions on the newcomer for the moment. Crandall's blood boiled as he thought of the reporter. He reached the side of the house and studied a big bay window, jutting out over his head. The window was open a crack, but he wondered if that had been done so a gun might be thrust through for some quick and accurate shooting. He removed his hat and tossed it past the window. Nothing happened and he picked the hat up. Then he retreated several feet from the house, gave a running jump and grasped the window sill. He drew himself up until one elbow could support him. He raised the window slowly with his other hand and finally crawled into a darkened room. He reached for his gun and a wave of horror struck him. He heard a low, bitter laugh and then the lights were snapped on!

Three men, with guns pointing in his direction, were placed at advantageous points around the room. Mike McBane, a thin, foppishly dressed killer, sat in an easy-chair, grinning at him. Off in one corner stood Jackson, the reporter. There

was a look of the sheerest amazement on his face.

"Welcome, Crandall," McBane said. "It took you a long time to get from the car to the house. Oh, don't look so stupid. Didn't you notice the caretaker's cottage near the entrance of the estate? One of my boys was in there. He saw you drive up, put the slug on the driver and then head for the house. He phoned me and I prepared a reception committee."

Crandall was looking directly at Jackson. "O. K., McBane," he said icily. "You've got a good reason to set a trap for me. But that louse over there—that two-timing skunk who worms his way into the confidence of the police and then turns all his information over to you—that's the guy I'd like to smear. In fact I think—"

Crandall doubled his fists and took a couple of experimental steps toward Jackson, who cowered in the corner. McBane's gunmen raised their weapons, but McBane laughed and waved that it was all right. Crandall stepped up to Jackson, gave him a push and then, with a furious lunge, really used his fists! Jackson fought back, but he was no match for Crandall. Both of them fell to the floor and rolled around for a few seconds. Then Crandall plastered a punch against Jackson's jaw. The reporter lay limp. Crandall arose and dusted off his clothes.

"Thanks, McBane, for the chance of pushing that guy's face in. I warned him I'd do it if he showed it around me again. Now what's the game? Do I get it without a chance?"

"Search him," McBane told his men. "He's got a gun some place."

Crandall offered no resistance as his nickel-plated revolver was taken from him. McBane arose and walked up to face Crandall.

"I owe you something, copper, and I'm really sorry I have to pay off with lead. Slim Dowling talked before he died. He told you he was tied up with my mob and that I'd promised to spring him. Well—I couldn't do that, and I knew Slim would sing before they led him to the chair. He could have turned that murder rap against me because I hired him for the job. So—Slim died. It's tough he lived long enough to talk. You're a pigheaded fool, Crandall. It proved a swell break for me when they fired you. You wouldn't talk. But some day you might change your mind; so I"m fixing things so you can't."

Jackson was sitting up, rubbing his jaw and trying to figure out just what happened. Crandall glared in his direction.

"And that rat was your finger man. The hoods you hired to rub out Slim weren't local boys. They didn't know me or Slim, either; so Jackson pointed us out. He heard Slim talking to me. He even heard what Slim said. I don't mind so much being trapped by you, McBane. It's either your life or mine, but that skunk over in the corner— Why I'd like to—"

Crandall seemed to go berserk. He pushed aside one of McBane's gunmen, made a savage rush toward Jackson, and hit him again. Jackson started yelling. Crandall floored him with a right hook, bent down and hoisted the groggy reporter to his feet and flung him against the wall.

"That's enough, Crandall," McBane said. "We haven't time to fool around. Because you did me a favor by not spilling what you knew, I'll do you one. Jackson goes out along

with you. Sorry, copper, but that's how things are."

Crandall removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed, closed his eyes and shrugged. McBane motioned his men to one side, drew a gun and walked up to Crandall. Suddenly the killer's eyes popped wide open.

Crandall held a gun, too—squarely in line with his heart!

"You have a gun. I have a gun," Crandall said quietly. "You can't shoot fast enough to keep me from blasting you, McBane. Your men can throw a fusillade into my hide, but still I'll pull this trigger and you're dead! What's it going to be, pal?"

McBane gulped and turned deathly pale. He didn't dare move; didn't dare squeeze the trigger of his gun. Like all so-called bad men, he was only tough when the cards were all in his favor. Now, with death staring him in the face, the nerve he usually displayed was all gone. His gun began to waver.

"Tell your boys to park their guns on the table in the middle of the room," Crandall ordered. "Then they are to back up against the wall. As for you, there's a choice: You can blast away and we'll die together, or you can drop that rod and give up. Take a chance on your lawyer getting you out of the rap. What's it to be, McBane?"

The crook gulped. Without turning his head, he spoke to his men. "Do as he says. Go on—can't you see this crazy fool is ready to shoot?"

The three men obeyed reluctantly, but McBane was still the boss. They felt that he had something up his sleeve. Crandall smiled coldly.

"Jackson—walk over to the table and pick up those guns. Cover the three chumps. If they move, let them have it."

Jackson, stunned by a combination of Crandall's furious attack on him and by the startling turn of events, half reeled over to the table. He put one gun in his pocket and aimed the other two at the crooks.

Crandall looked straight into McBane's eyes. "So it's between you and me, Mike. We're both going to die because if you don't pull the trigger on me, I'll start the fireworks. Suppose I count five. Then we shoot together!"

"I . . . I'll give you twenty-five grand to forget all this," McBane whispered hoarsely. "No, I'll make it fifty grand. Nobody will ever know what happened. You can loaf the rest of your life on that much dough. We'll knock off Jackson—"

Crandall said: "One—two—three four—"

"No!" McBane yelled frantically. "No, Crandall! Don't shoot me. I don't want to die that way. I've seen men die with bullets through their bellies. I can't stand it. Don't shoot!"

"Five—" Crandall said coldly.

McBane's gun sagged down. Crandall suddenly brought his own weapon down, too, crashing against McBane's wrist. The killer's gun fell to the floor. Crandall stepped back, motioned McBane into a corner and then scooped up his weapon.

"Jackson," Crandall said, "go into the next room. There's a phone there—or should be. Call headquarters and tell the commissioner to get down here—fast. Warn him there's a mug in a gate house, probably armed. Go on—what are you waiting for?"

Jackson wheeled and rushed into the next room. McBane moved over beside his three men. He didn't look

at them and he was still shaking visibly with terror.

They were like that when a few shots announced the arrival of the police. The commissioner led the raiding squad, and Jackson opened the door for them. Handcuffs clicked around the wrists of the killers. Crandall's gun hand sagged. He staggered over to a chair and fell into it. Beads of perspiration covered his face, and he was breathing like a fighter after ten rounds in the ring.

"Have you guessed the answer yet?" Crandall looked up at the commissioner. "Young Jackson has. I can tell by looking at his face."

The commissioner gaped at Crandall. "Slim didn't talk. You faked it! You deliberately allowed that unfavorable publicity to go out, so whoever had Slim killed, would come for you. All the criticism we heaped on you was exactly what you planned. Crandall . . . I, well I don't know just exactly what to say. I—"

Jackson came forward. "He's going to say I was one of McBane's men; that I put the finger on him for the killers. But I didn't. I swear it! I was on my way to the prison to—"

"To get a story from the warden," Crandall said. "I know because I checked. You just happened to be there. McBane's real finger man thought you might have heard something and was holding off for some reason. I knew you didn't hear a word because Slim didn't talk. He was dead when I unlocked him from the coach seat. Dead men never talk! I put the rest of it on thick—as an act—for the benefit of the finger man. I even encouraged your hate, Jackson, so you'd write some particularly vile stories about me. I'm sorry I had to get so rough, but I had two guns when I came in here. I planted one of them on you. After they searched me and became careless, I tackled you again, got the gun back and you know the rest of the story."

Jackson looked a little wild, kept glancing toward the door. "I ought to phone in this yarn quick, but first I've got to tell about the way you handled McBane. It was the bravest thing I ever saw. I'm going to start a campaign to get you promoted—high up. Why, there isn't a nerve in that man's body. He just stood there, holding his gun on McBane, knowing the crook might shoot at any second."

Crandall made a wry face. "Forget it. McBane is a rat. All guys who hire other men to do their dangerous killing for them are as yellow as a jackal."

"But you couldn't be sure, Crandall," Jackson persisted. "McBane was so nervous that he might have pulled the trigger by accident. Or his men might have decided to take a hand. I used to think being afraid was cowardly; but it isn't. McBane tricked me into coming here. Then he told me he was going to kill me and I was afraid. I was so scared I could hardly stand up."

Crandall grabbed Jackson's tie and pulled him closer. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Listen—I was never so scared in my life, either. Why do you think I'm sitting down? My knees are made of rubber; my heart beat ten million times when I started counting. Put that in your paper—"

"But I . . . I don't want to—" Jackson gasped.

"And I'll break your neck," Crandall added softly, with a wide grin.



MARKSMAN

by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

I am very ordinary. I am of medium height, medium income, average intelligence—strictly middle class. In fact, I am a little less than ordinary because I lack physical courage.

Still, I murdered a man! My neighbors all know it. The whole country knows it. And when my eighteen-month-old son grows up, he will hear about it. And that hurts more than all the rest. But I couldn't help it. I had to—

I was sitting in my living room. I was reading about the Finns' gallant stand against the Russians and feeling the admiration that weak men feel for the brave. I admired them particularly for the beautiful way they were handling their rifles. I could appreciate that, because in this one way I am a little above the

ordinary. I am president of the local rifle club, and last year I won the Southern States Championship.

I was sitting there alone because Alice had gone out to her bridge club and I had to stay home with Buster. There were just the two of us in the house. Buster was in the back bedroom, asleep in his crib. I was in the living room reading about the Finns and I began to feel nervous.

I began to feel nervous because I am afraid of the dark, and if you think that's funny in a grown man, let me correct you. It's sad and damnable and maddening; but it's not funny—not at all.

I put the paper down. It was a gloomy night outside, and the light from the street lamp was haloed in a late spring fog. It was a hell of a night for a man afraid of the dark to be home alone.

I decided to put Buster into the big bed and climb in with him. I am just ordinary enough to enjoy that. I turned out the lights in the living room and was halfway to the bedroom when the phone rang.

I had a premonition as I picked up the receiver. Or perhaps I was just scared. Perhaps, if it had been Alice, I would have had the same childed feeling. But it wasn't Alice. It was a man's voice, low, muffled.

He said: "It's important that I see you tonight, Mr. Johnson. Where can you meet me?"

I hesitated. "Who is this?"

"It's about the Reform League," he said. "I can't give you my name over the phone."

I knew him for a phony then. Because if he could say "Reform League" over a phone, he could give his name. There was nothing secret about that. All of us were listed on the league stationery.

My heart began to hammer and I fought to keep my voice calm. I said: "You can see me at my store in the morning."

"No!" the voice said. "I'll be over in about ten minutes."

I started to object but the line was dead.

I was scared. I went into the baby's room and closed the window. I latched it. I looked into his closet. Then I watched him for a second, and I was close to tears. He was lying flat on his back, his hands above his head. He was smiling faintly. I turned off the light and looked out the window into the back yard.

But all I could see was mist and shadow.

From the shelf in my closet, I took out the Camp Perry model Colt that Alice had given me for Christmas. It had a long barrel, but the pockets in my corduroy house jacket were ample. I turned on the porch light and sat down to wait.

This Reform League was the latest attempt to clean up our town. And it wasn't having any more success than its predecessors, because whoever controlled the graft in this rotten little metropolis was in absolute control.

The police dragged in hoodlum after hoodlum and turned on the heat. They even pulled in one poor snowbird and kept him off the stuff for a week. He was about ready for the asylum then, but it did no good. Nobody would break.

All the law could do was sentence them; squealing would mean certain suicide.

I had been made an honorary member when I won the Southern States and had promptly forgetten all about

it. But evidently somebody else hadn't.

I shivered a little and looked out the window. I hoped against hope that Alice wouldn't come home early. Then, as I fingered the Colt in my pocket, the doorbell rang.

I could feel the hair on my neck bristle, and my hand on the doorknob shook. The man standing on the porch was about my height, but broad.

I said: "Come in."

He didn't say a word as he walked into the living room. He was foreign-looking, with a bluish cast to his beard stubble, and dark, murky eyes. He sat down on the room's biggest chair and tensed on its edge.

He didn't give me a chance to open my mouth. He said: "You're a good shot with a rifle? An expert?"

I nodded.

"We've got a job for you—to kill a man!"

I was plenty scared. But I took out the Colt. I said: "What's to prevent me from doing that right now?"

I was the only frightened person in that room. He said: "Put it away. You could kill me all right. But your wife—and the kid—" He shrugged. "The boss never makes a mistake. You'd better just sit and listen."

I thought of Alice and Buster. I sat down shakily.

He said: "Bruce Barnum is going to give a surprise talk at the band concert in the city park. He's got some names to name and dirt to spill. You will be in the loft of that garage across the street. You will kill him from the window with a rifle. The boss thinks it should put an end to all this reform stuff. The boss is getting annoyed with all these reform movements that keep popping up."

Bruce Barnum was head of the league. He was fearless and a bachelor. That's why they'd picked him for the job. And he was my friend. I told Bluebeard that.

He shrugged again. "Even if I felt sorry for you, it wouldn't make any difference. I work under orders."

I said slowly: "There's quite a bit of money represented on the league board. It would be worth all we could raise to learn the name of the boss."

He smiled faintly. "I'm one of the few guys who know that. And there isn't enough money in the world to buy my life." He paused. "We've tried to get Barnum a couple of times. But he's pretty well guarded. That's why we have to do it from a distance. And you just happen to be the unlucky guy."

"And if I refuse?"

For the third time he shrugged. "Maybe you, maybe your wife or the kid—"

I almost went for the Colt again. But it would do no good. As he said, he was only working under orders.

As he rose go, he said casually: "Don't look so sick. Murder's a little tough the first time. But you get used to it." His eyes fell on the paper. "They're sure getting used to it in Russia."

The whole thing was like something out of a gangster movie, one of those wild B pictures. But this was no movie. This was happening to me, George Johnson, citizen. I tried to get a grip on myself, reason sanely. But my mind was numb.

At the door, Bluebeard said: "We'll get in touch with you again, probably tomorrow."

I only nodded.

I went back to the living room and

sat down again. I was still sitting there, staring dumbly at nothing, when Alice and Fred Lock came in.

Alice said: "Why, George Fraidy-Cat Johnson! Don't tell me you saw another ghost?"

I tried to smile. Fred Lock was looking at me curiously.

Alice sensed, then, that this was something more than my usual home-alone nervousness. "What happened?" she asked.

I hesitated. It was Fred who had nominated me for the league. If I told anyone, I could tell him. But I shook my head. "Nothing happened," I said. "I don't feel so well."

Fred left then, and Alice said: "You're not jealous, are you, George? I mean—I know he's been around a lot lately, but—"

That was almost funny. Alice and Fred had been practically engaged all through college. Then Fred went to law school, and I stepped in. Fred just couldn't keep away from her, now, and I wouldn't have liked that if I hadn't trusted Alice a hundred percent.

"I'm not jealous," I told her. "I'm a little fagged out. There's been a lot of trouble at the store lately, spring inventory and all." I knew then that I'd never be able to tell her.

I remembered Bluebeard's comment, and I tried to tell myself that mass murder was going on in Europe; that I had to do this for my family. But I couldn't. I'd never even been able to go hunting, and, now, I was expected to kill a man.

I wasn't worth anything at the store next morning. I thought of taking the family out of town. But I would probably be trailed, and I didn't have the money to re-establish myself in another town.

There was a luncheon meeting of the league at noon. I had to stay active to keep from going crazy so I attended.

When Bruce Barnum got up to speak, I kept my eyes averted. I kept seeing a bullet hole in his high forehead, blood in the grayish-black of his hair. Nausea stirred in me. Fred Lock was sitting next to me, and he whispered: "What's the matter, George? You still sick?"

I nodded.

Barnum was saying: "I want you all to understand that the police are one hundred percent behind us. There have been rumors—and one of the papers has hinted—that a corrupt police department is partly responsible for this town's criminal record. I have investigated this thoroughly for the past month and have proved to myself that the rumor has no basis in fact. I wish you would give this information all the publicity within your power. I know and—"

I couldn't listen any more. I mumbled something to Fred about explaining to the others; then I slipped out the door.

But, outside, there was no place to go. I could have gone back to the store; but it's a sporting-goods store, and I feature a complete line of rifles. I didn't want to look at any rifles this afternoon. I got into my car and headed for the country.

It was beautiful. The mist of the evening before had brought out all the sleepy beauty of our southern spring. The sun was hot, but the sun could never get too hot for me. I love it too well. Which is just another way of saying I hate the dark.

I think, if Bluebeard had approached me in the daytime, I would have shot him.

My mind went back to the luncheon. I remembered Barnum's words regarding the police department. Perhaps—just perhaps—the police had uncovered something new. I turned the car back toward town.

My association with the league gave me a few privileges, and I had known the chief of police since boyhood. He shook his head at my question.

"Nothing new, George. It's the same old story, and it will continue to be the same story until we get the headman." He shook his bushy head hopelessly. "Terror rules this gang. If we could get the boss, the organization would dissolve. I know that as well as I know my name. I'm willing to admit that we've hit a new low in the viciousness of our third degrees; but not a man will break. They're scum, every last one of them, but their fear of the boss is greater than their fear of us."

I knew that too well. Because here I was, three feet from the law, and I was no criminal. Still, I couldn't say what I wanted to say. I couldn't tell an old friend about Bluebeard. I couldn't go to the law which I was pledged to uphold. It was like living under a dictator—a criminal dictator! It wasn't American.

Oh, I cursed myself silently. And I was thoroughly ashamed of my yellow streak. But I didn't say anything. That, really, is what is important.

I left, and again I had no place to go.

Then I remembered I had to go one place. Fred Lock had borrowed my Varminter a few weeks ago for a local meet. It was the gun I intended to use. I drove over to the boulevard.

There was a black sedan in the drive. If it was Fred's, it was a new one. But it wasn't Fred's. A little man in a loud suit was sitting in Fred's study when the butler ushered me in.

Fred was saying: "And you can tell your boss that I have no price. You can tell him that it's only a matter of weeks, now, before we bust his rotten ring wide open. Now, get out of here!"

The little fellow growled something, shot me a scornful glance and walked out.

Fred was smiling grimly. "One of the big boy's stooges trying to buy me off. I'd have thrown him in jail if I thought it would do any good."

I said something about his courage, and he shook his head. "It's not courage. I have all the money I need and enough love for my home town to fight for it."

I asked for my gun, and he lifted it from the rack in one corner of the room.

"It's a beauty, George. If you ever want to sell it—"

After I used it, I would be glad to give it away. But I didn't tell Fred that.

It was late enough now to go home. And I dreaded it because the more I saw of Alice and Buster now, the more I would miss them later. For I knew, despite my weakness, that I could never again face them unless I confessed. And that would mean a life sentence, at least.

Buster was in one of his playful moods. For a half-hour I tried to share that mood; tried to hide the sickness and the fear within me. But it was hopeless. I went down into the basement to load some cartridges. As I passed through the

kitchen, Alice looked at me curiously. But she said nothing.

I have all the paraphernalia for making my own cartridges, including a mold of my own design. It would be possible for me to make a bullet which would hit Bruce Barnum between the eyes and still not kill him.

For a moment I toyed with the idea. It would be possible, but the results wouldn't be a certainty. And if Bluebeard's boss should suspect—I shivered.

I heard Buster's feet on the floor above; heard Alice moving about the kitchen. I was a weak man, but I could commit murder for them.

I compromised then. Two of the cartridges carried the regular load; the third I loaded lightly.

I put the gun in a machine rest and fired it with the light load. Then I examined the pine board I had used as a target. If I were to use a load that light, I would have to compensate for the comparatively short distance from the garage loft to the bandstand. And Bruce Barnum would be blind for life, even if I didn't kill him!

I made another of the light cartridges before Alice called me to dinner. I would take it along, tomorrow night, and perhaps I would have the nerve to use it.

Bluebeard called at ten o'clock. "Tomorrow night's the band concert," he said. "I'll pick you up in front of your store at eight."

I mumbled something and hung up.

Back in the living room, Alice put down her paper. She said: "I want to know what's wrong, George." Her blue eyes were filled with worry. "Don't tell me it's business. And it's not your health. It's something a lot more important than either—and I want to help."

I was silent for seconds. Finally, I said: "You'll know by Saturday. It's about the league and I'm pledged to secrecy. But I promise you'll have all the details by Saturday."

Quietly, she asked: "Is is dangerous, George?"

I nodded. "It's dangerous, honey. But I have to go through with it." I looked at her squarely. "Remember, honey, that whatever I do, I do for you and Buster. I'm not the cinema type, but you can believe that no one could love you more than I do."

She smiled then, and there was more than love in that smile. There was admiration, and that was something I didn't deserve. I kissed her humbly.

That night was sleepless of course. And I will never remember that next day. I was going through the mechanics of my regular routine. But behind the front, I was a jumbled mass of nerves, and I knew that without some form of opiate, I would be a poor marksman that night. All the long day I fought myself, and by six o'clock I had regained some semblance of normalcy.

I had brought my rifle down in the morning; so I didn't need to go home for dinner. I decided to eat at a restaurant, and then come back to the store to meet Bluebeard.

I called Alice.

"This business," she asked hesitantly, "Is it coming off tonight?"

"It is," I said.

The line was quiet a moment. Then: "You took your rifle this morning, George—that new one."

"I did," I said.

Her voice was almost a whisper,

now. "I'll wait up for you, George. And—I'll pray."

I was physically sick for the next fifteen minutes. I decided not to eat. I locked the store and turned out the lights. And for the next two hours, I walked the streets.

I don't know what streets. I walked and cursed. I cursed myself and the criminal boss. I even cursed Barnum for starting the league. But, mostly, I cursed myself.

I was in front of the store at eight o'clock. And a big black sedan was waiting. The front door was open. Bluebeard was behind the wheel. I got my gun and came out again.

Without a word I climbed in. Bluebeard just nodded; then he swung the big car away from the curb and up toward the city park.

The park was nearly filled when we pulled into the alley alongside the garage. The huge bandstand was brilliantly lighted; the shell behind it looking like an inverted sea shell, magnified thousands of times.

Bluebeard said: "You've got a good white background there, and the lights in the garage will do."

I said nothing.

Only one man was in the lower part of the garage. He watched us as we silently climbed the stairs to the loft. He may have been an accomplice or he may have been another me. I didn't know, and I didn't care.

The loft smelled of oil and rubber and dust. At one end, the window was open toward the park. The light was all right, and it was an easy shot. And my nervousness was

gone. I was an inanimate piece of flesh at the moment. A murderer!

There were three men on the bandstand, three men in evening clothes. Their black suits stood out against the shell of the rostrum. The middle man was Barnum. The man on the left, the man who was rising to speak, was Fred Lock. He said over the public address system: "We have a surprise for you tonight—"

I didn't listen; Bluebeard was talking. "We thought you might try to pull a double cross; so I brought along a cartridge that we know will do the trick. I'll take those you have in your pocket."

I handed him the three I had brought along. He took a stand against the opposite wall. The muzzle of his automatic was on me and it didn't waver a bit.

I broke open the breech. From force of habit, I weighed the cartridge in my hand; glanced at it. For a second my heart stopped beating.

That mark on the rim! Was it—It was, beyond a doubt. And the bullet had been cast in my own mold. The taper was unmistakable, and so was that mark that had been made when my tool slipped—the J-shaped mark that wouldn't be duplicated in a million shells.

It was one of the cartridges I had given Fred Lock!

All the incidents of the past turbulent days came to my mind. The car in Fred's drive, the same that had carried me tonight. I had caught him unawares, and he had covered his windy speech to the little fellow. And tonight's talk was to be a secret among the members of the league. Yet, Bluebeard had known the night he first came to call. And I remembered that Fred had been a poor credit risk two years ago; while today he was wealthy. And he had always coveted Alice. He would want me out of the way!

I snapped the gun shut and laid it on the sill. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't nervous. I was something far worse than that. I was filled with hate!

I knelt behind the rifle, my hands steady. I caught Fred's forehead in the 'scope. I pulled the trigger gently.

It was an easy shot.

It wasn't courage that filled me when I turned to Bluebeard. I was beyond courage. I wasn't even fully conscious.

"I missed Barnum," I said.

His face was stoical as he crossed the room toward me. He had the automatic jammed in my ribs as he looked out the window. The people were streaming onto the stand, but he saw what he wanted to see.

Then he turned to me, and still I felt no fear.

"Maybe," he said softly, "you didn't miss. You'd better git; nobody's coming this way, yet."

I said: "You mean you're not going to—"

"Nobody wants to kill," he said. "Not even me, unless there's money in it. And who'd pay me, now?" He threw the automatic behind a pile of tires and clomped down the stairs, out of my sight and out of my life—

I was cleared of course. Especially after a police search of Lock's papers. And our town is clean. But I killed a man! And it doesn't help to know I had to. My guns are sold, my beautiful guns. And fishing isn't in it with target shooting.

But I suppose I'll learn to like it after a while.

THE MYSTERY OF THE One-eyed man



by MARK HARPER

CHAPTER I.

MURDER FRAME.

It's a cinch that if I were picking my clients, I wouldn't have gone out of my way to choose the guy that eased himself into the chair on the other side of my desk. He had a black patch over his right eye—or where the eye had been—and his black hair was uncombed and straggled over a low forehead. His mouth was loose lipped, a red slit in blue-black jowls. The old blue suit he had on was wrinkled, shiny and baggy. What I could see of linen

was soiled and the balled fist he put on the desk as he talked was dirty with grimy fingernails.

But there was nothing dirty, that I could see, about the hundred-dollar bill he slipped over the desk when he finished his spiel. He stood up, a good-sized man with slouched shoulders and a slow, heavy walk. I let him go; I let the C-note rest on the desk. There wasn't enough draft to waft it away while I sparred a round or two with my alleged common sense.

The thing was screwy. It seems this guy—Sam Smalley was the name he gave me—had a brother, Lemuel, always a right guy, according to Sam, and pretty well fixed. Lemuel paid Sam's way, although Sam kept his home alone. Sam let on that he was the no-account member of the family, but he was kind of fond of Lem and didn't want him to get in trouble. And I guessed he didn't want to lose a meal ticket either. Sam's grief was that he feared Lem was going to be set up in a frame that would ruin him, if nothing worse. I thought of Sam's one eye while he was telling me that, and all I could make of it was that he was feeling pretty bad about the whole business. Maybe if he'd had two eyes I might have concluded something different, but I had to take what I had—or rather, what he had.

The job I was supposed to do was to hold myself in readiness, then when the frame started working, to jump in and bust it up. Of course, everyone in town knows who my pet client is and my stand-in with the regular guys of the police force; so there was nothing strange in his picking me. But the screwy part of it was that Lem mustn't know anything about it, or me either. Think that one over. I did, and got nothing but a headache. Still, a hundred dollars is all of a hundred these days.

I stuck it in my pocket and went about finishing the business that had to be wound up that afternoon. Along in the evening I drifted back to the office to smoke a pipe of satisfaction over the job I'd just done. And that was how Madge Carroll was able to catch up with me.

"Mr. Grand—Dick, for Heaven's sake," she said all in one breath and made the phone tingle with it, "get downstairs fast! I'll be there in a jiff." That was all. And that was plenty.

Here's the connection, unless you know it. Madge and young Frank Hollister were a combination. Frank was a likable kid, not too bad but with too much easy money. And here's the real kick—Frank was the one apple in the eye of James R. Hollister, multimillionaire oil man and my sense of security.

I smoked the pipe downstairs; but all my thoughts turned it bitter on me by the time I reached the curb, and I dumped it. Then there was Madge, wheeling her two-door sedan alongside and jerking me back against the seat as she jumped it ahead again. She's always easy to look at; but I'd caught the bright spots on her cheeks and the hard look in her eyes.

"It's the Carlton woman's bungalow on Sorrento Street," she bit off out of tight lips. "Frank says it's the final payoff. Somebody phoned just before I got hold of you. That it could be something else."

"Who is somebody?"

"Don't know. Never heard the voice before. Wouldn't tell. Dial phone. Don't make me talk so much."

"Easy, Madge," I told her, as we

skidded the full width of a corner and barely straightened before crashing the curb. "It'll take longer to walk, you know. Vera got her hooks in?"

"Frank never did anything but play around with Vera Carlton. I know my Frank, damn him. It's something else."

I got my working gloves on by the time we turned into Sorrento—you know, thin, loose-fitting gloves that don't take anything from your fingers, not even prints. I told Madge to slow down. We were approaching that quiet section that runs to a string of separate bungalows where, for some reason or other, the lights are not one more than the city requires.

" 'Way down, Madge," I told her. "I'll hop. You take the next corner and wait."

There wasn't a car or a pedestrian on the block that I could see, as I slipped out the door. I soft-footed to a little white bungalow that was just like all the rest. I trusted to Madge to pick the right one. She had.

I'd seen a dim light in a side window. There was none in the hallway. The door was unlocked and I didn't ring. I stepped from the dinky hallway to a small, square living room, and I didn't have to go any farther.

Frank Hollister was slumped in an easy-chair, his head lolled to one side and he was snoring out loud. In another chair, a few feet from him, was Vera Carlton, facing him but not seeing him at all. She might have been a gorgeous woman. I wasn't thinking of that. I was looking at the hilt of a knife sticking from her left breast. And I was wondering just how her body could have stayed in that position, with her chin on her chest, almost touching the knife's hilt. But this was no time to wonder about anything.

Drawn up almost between the two of them was a small, round table. On that were a bottle and a couple of glasses. I sniffed at Frank's breath and the glass nearer him and got the same. I was just sniffing at Vera's glass, when I held it just where it was, under my nose.

"Murder, huh?" a voice breathed over my shoulder.

"You little fool, Madge," I blurted at her. "Why didn't you stick by the car?"

"Look, Dick," she said, as if the sight of murder was an everyday occurence to her, "we have to get Frank out of here fast!"

"Oh, yeah? Police or no police, huh?"

Don't get the idea I just stood there and talked. I was as busy wiping the arms of Frank's chair, the bottle and both glasses—although I wasn't leaving those there—also the table and the hilt of the knife. Madge did turn her head away when I got to that.

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's J. R.'s orders and he'll have to take the blame, if there is any."

"What do you mean?" I shot at her.

"J. R. knew about the call; knew I was coming—with you. He said: 'Do anything for Frank—anything—and I'll foot the bill.' "

"Then he'll probably be caring for me for life," I growled, coming back from wiping the doorknobs. My conscience wasn't troubling me; it wasn't that. I knew Frank Hollister hadn't pulled this trick. Don't ask me why I was certain. It wasn't because he had been drugged; not entirely that. It was more that my sixth sense, developed from years of

sleuthing, told me right off the bat he was in a frame.

Of course, Frank's chance was best to be left right there, with the glasses and all—if I could get Captain Wright of homicide first on the job. But something had been whispering in my ear from the instant I'd entered the room that other cops would be on their way here, now. The thing was that J. R. wouldn't see it that way. If I didn't make a try to get Frank out, there'd be no more sense of security for me. Maybe I'd got that all sized up when I started taking fingerprints off the glasses.

"You get back to that car, Madge," I snapped at her. "I'll go out the back way. Run it along to meet me. And, here, take the bottle and glasses."

I'd found Frank's hat, coat, gloves and stick. By the time Madge was closing the front door, I had the whole mess over my shoulder, Frank included, and was starting for the back. I made it.

I was just getting up to the sidewalk and Madge's car, when this guy came sauntering down the street, swinging his cane as if he didn't have a care in the world. Remember when you were a kid and got caught coming out of the neighbor's yard with your pockets stuffed full of what didn't belong to you? Well, multiply that by a thousand and you'll have a faint idea how tickled I was to see this guy. That was murder back there, and this was Exhibit A I had over my shoulder.

"Ah!" the guy said, as if startled, and maybe he was, but he didn't have anything on me. "Can I be of any assistance?" His voice had a funny sound. Perhaps it was natural; perhaps I was hearing things with all the blood rushing around in my head.

"You can *not!*" I growled at him, keeping my head low and behind Frank Hollister's limp body. "Nothing but a drunk."

That didn't stall him. He came close.

"Why," he said, peering at Frank in spite of my twisting him around to dump him in the door Madge had opened, "it's young Mr. Hollister. Well, well—that's too bad."

"Will you get the hell away from here?" I snarled, trying to wedge Frank through.

"I was just trying to help, as any decent citizen would," he said coldly in that funny tone of his. "It seems very peculiar to me, sir, the way you're acting."

"Would it seem peculiar to you," I ground out, "if you got a bullet in the guts?"

"Sir?"

He drew back a half pace at that, and I got Frank stuck in somehow. A little motion caught the corner of my eye. Madge Carroll had a little gun in her hand, and that gun was pointed at the guy's back! She'd got the picture all right, and maybe for a second I wished she'd let him have it; but I moved between them.

"We'll take him to a hospital, miss," I said, loudly. But she whispered: "The Cliff."

I nodded. The Cliff was a little shack on the bay where J. R. went out to rest and look at his big oil basin across the water. No one knew about it except the Hollisters and myself—and Madge, of course. Just the place to hide Frank and get his story without anyone around to hear it. I moved to circle around the car, but I hadn't settled what I was going to do about this guy; and then he spoke.

"I think I should like to know more about this matter."

I gave Madge the high sign and

she pulled away slowly, leaving the two of us; and if I never understood before why a lad pulls a second murder to cover up a first, I did right then. I looked him over. He was a well-built man, straight as a ramrod. He had one of those dinky little spike mustaches, and he was carefully dressed but without swagger.

"All right," I said, hard. "You asked for it." I flashed my private-detective badge, but in that light it was just a badge. "I'll take your name and your reason for being in this particular locality at just this time."

"A private detective," he murmured. And while I was getting over that jolt, he handed me another: "Why, certainly. I am Lemuel Smalley. And as for—"

"Huh?" I shot at him.

"Lemuel Smalley. Shall I spell it out for you?"

Now that was a laugh, but not a bit funny. I had a century in my pocket to keep this guy out of a frame, and here he walks up the stret and put *me* in a sweet one.

"What the hell you doing around here?" I yammered.

"Which suggests," he said softly, "that you know my home is not here. I'll pass that to answer your question. I have been spending the evening with friends and was just returning from the corner with cigarettes." He raised his cane and pointed down the street to a car I'd already noticed, with another just ahead of it.

I looked and didn't like what I saw. Madge had passed the second car which started to move out after her. She must have seen that at the same time, for she picked up speed in a hurry. I was still watching them when I got the idea.

"If that's your car, Smalley, we'll take it," I said and swung my hand toward the place where I carried my gun to let him know I meant it. It wasn't such a hot idea after all.

I heard the swish of the cane, but I didn't duck fast enough. It caught me solidly on the temple and sent me reeling into the gutter! I wasn't out; but I was wabbly when I got back to my feet, and the gun in my hand was shaking. Smalley hadn't waited; he was halfway to his car. I didn't try to stop him. I didn't think I could hit him, and I didn't want to make too much noise around there. He made it and his car jerked away, leaving me with a whole lot of new ideas buzzing around in my bonnet—and none of them good.

Back on Sorrento Street I heard a peep of a siren that was shut off quick, but it was enough to start me in the direction Smalley had gone. I passed the first intersection without seeing a taxi near enough to call and was halfway to the second when it came—a big big black sedan.

I'd glanced over my shoulder as it came up behind me, a convenient habit at times and this was one of them. I saw a black snout and went down on my tummy before it started to blossom flame! The first burst went over me. The second, gouging the sidewalk with ripping lead, didn't quite catch up with my rolling until I put on brakes behind a tree. And that was convenient, too.

I took a quick peek, saw that they had slowed for a last, sure shot and let them have two or three before I ducked back and heard lead hammer into the trunk of the tree. Then they pulled away fast, turning to the right. I went the other way and didn't stop to breathe until I'd hopped a cab. I've had close ones, but I don't want them any nearer than that. Every time I'd flopped

I'd seen that ripping line of bullets crawling closer.

They hadn't killed me. That was their first mistake. And I'd caught the glimpse of a face behind the Tommy—Stubby Mellor, a tough mug with a gun for hire. Somebody wanted me out bad. It wasn't hard to guess why. But as to who—well, the only guy I'd seen around there was Lem Smalley, but that didn't make sense. If anything, he had me the other way around. Still, I had a hunch it might be an idea to talk with his one-eyed brother, Sam. He might be able to stop Lemuel talking, and that would be a help anyway you look at it.

Right now, I had business in another direction. I had to catch up with Madge Carroll and Frank and whoever was after them. I didn't want any taxi hound in this. My car was in the center of town but J. R.'s big place was right on the way to the Cliff. I hated to waste the time but there was no help for it, and I had to clear my trail, too. I jumped the cab, climbed another and gave J. R.'s number. There was too much to worry about to do much clear thinking, but, at least, I was getting the impression that a pretty good-sized crowd was getting into this.

CHAPTER II.

BULLET CHATTER!

I had to go into the library to talk to J. R. He was there alone, a tall, erect man of forty-five or so, a little gray, a little worn around the eyes but steady and cool.

"I got to have a car quick, J. R.," I told him.

His gray eyes fixed hard on me.

"Certainly," he said quietly. "Tell me what has happened. What is Frank involved in, now?"

"Murder!" I yapped. It hit him square between the eyes, but he took it. I told him what we'd found in the bungalow. Then the phone rang. He called to me when I was halfway to the door. I stopped with my hand on the knob.

I heard him say a "Yes" and a "No" and "Keep some men around there;" then he turned to me.

"A small explosion in the oil basin," he said, as if he were telling me that it looked like rain before morning. "No property damage to speak of; one man badly mangled. It was out near the dock, and some men were seen putting off from there earlier in the evening. There are between two and three million dollars in crude and refined oil in the basin tonight, with another tanker warped in. I think you should go down there, Richard."

"I ought to be in seventeen other places, right now," I snapped. "I have to get to Frank, and I have to get to him quick." I had the door open. "I'll call you from somewhere, J. R. I'm heading for the Cliff. Say—if someone asks you for a hundred thousand dollars to get Frank clear, stall and trace it. And if the police ask for me, tell them I sailed for China this afternoon."

The Cliff was only about five miles out, where J. R. had found a spot on a little hill close to the water. There was no other place anywhere around, and the house was screened from sight by the trees and bushes. No phone of course. J. R. went there to rest. I was almost there and was thinking of how I'd left J. R. standing there in his big library, looking like an old soldier reading the casualty list; then I suddenly remembered I hadn't had time to tell him about the guy, Smalley, seeing us take off. And just as suddenly I quit thinking about both.

A car passed me, going fast. I glanced in the rear-view mirror. It was stopping—and turning around. I stepped on the gas. I didn't like their sudden interest. They weren't coppers, and they couldn't have seen the small J. R. H. on the panel; but they could hardly have missed the low license number that was as well known as the Hollister name.

It was like adding two and two. No one had known about the Hollister shack. Therefore, anyone interester in a Hollister car going to the Cliff, now, must have been there recently with a member of the Hollister family. And by that same reasoning, that member should be there, now, and the lads behind me didn't want him seen.

There were no other cars on that stretch which was a long, little-used straightaway back from the beach, then a curve around the hill on which the shack set. I watched the road and I watched the rear view. I'd seen two heads in their bus and they'd probably spotted one in mine. It was a neat little coupé I was shoving, and I couldn't see they were cutting much from the two-three hundred yards lead I'd had. I saw that the curve began about a quarter of a mile ahead; then I glanced back into the rear-view mirror just as a flame blossomed from their right-side window and a bullet whanged off a top corner of the coupé!

I tried for another notch above the seventy-five I was making but I knew I couldn't take the curve at that speed. Then another bullet smashed the rear window, and a bunch of them slammed into the metal body! I could see the dust kick up ahead where they were trying for the wheels. And using that machine gun, there, told me that it wouldn't make any difference to whoever was in the shack.

I took a chance and cut over to the extreme left edge of the road and hit the curve as it started that way, twisting around the hill to the right. I let up on the throttle; I had to. Then I felt a wheel jarring under me. I skidded clean across the road, was dragged around almost sidewise! The coupé straightened out momentarily, skidded again, then made the center of the curve and crashed into the bushes just beyond. But I was out and scrambling up the hill through the bushes before she'd settled.

A glance over my shoulder showed the curving road but no car on it. That meant they'd stopped on the near side of the hill and were trying to beat me up to the top—with a Tommy-gun to tell me to mind my own business. I slowed up and started playing Injun around the slope where they would have to come. They'd look for me at the top but might not expect me here.

It wasn't much of a hill, but on this side, away from the water, it was pretty well covered with trees and bushes right up to where the top had been cleared for the shack. There had been too many bullets coming my way that evening and I was sore. Of course, these guys didn't know who I was, but I couldn't see that it made any difference if I stopped just one hunk of their lead. Then I heard them.

A twig cracked off to my right. I listened, heard the whisper of another, got their direction and judged they were still slightly below my level. I made a dozen feet ahead without sound and stopped again. It was pretty dark up there—no light that did any good, except show one shadow darker than another, or one that moved. And I saw a blur pushing upward about thirty feet away. I glanced to the left, made out a

stretch where the bushes were thinner and waited a couple of seconds. When the blur reached it I was ready.

Risky, yes. But more than once my life has depended on being able to send a bullet where I want it to land. And with the shot, I jumped to my left. I kept on jumping a few yards then circled ahead. It was a cinch the guy couldn't hear me with the Tommy-gun roaring in his ears. I took a chance he couldn't see, although he was beginning to rake the bushes in the direction I'd moved. But I got a good idea of just where he was, behind those flashes, and I took time to aim the one shot I gave him back.

A big silence followed the echoes of the Tommy-gun that gradually died away. Maybe I should have gone down there to make sure. I listened for a second, instead, heard nothing at all and beat it fast for the top. From the first shot back there on the road, something had been telling me that if I was needed at the shack, I was needed quick.

The front door was fastened and I didn't stop to run around back. I broke in a window with my flash, slipped the catch, got inside and swept the beam ahead. There were a couple of bunks in this main room and both were empty. I turned the beam on the floor, saw nothing at first, then moved it around. Plumb up against the door was Madge Carroll, bound and practically naked. Her mouth was taped. She was conscious, but she wasn't looking my way. Her eyes, wild and staring, were fixed on something I hadn't seen across the room, and they told me she wanted me to see it, too.

I flicked the flash over there, and I don't know whether my thoughts or what I did were faster. Something was just about to happen. I caught that much, and the rest was printed on my mind like a photo: some sort of contrivance with a suspended weight that was already beginning to tremble as if ready to let go! I'd noticed a strong smell of oil when I'd come through the window, and I suppose the two things sort of hit together in my mind.

All I know is that I had Madge out the window somehow and was halfway through, myself, when there was a thud and a slight explosion like a cap going off, instantly swallowed in a roar of flames!

There was a sudden flare of light as the flames shot across the floor but I didn't need that to hustle me, not with my back feeling as it was burning up behind. I got through, grabbed Madge from the porch, skidded out to the clearing and threw myself flat on my back in the wet grass to put out my fire. Then I carried her to the edge of the clearing before tearing the tape from her lips and slitting the ropes that bound her.

"Frank?" I shot at her, with a nod back at the bursting flames and throwing her my coat.

"Gone!" she sort of gasped, as if she wasn't sure she had a voice any more. "I don't know where they took him," she went on. "A car followed us all the way. I couldn't lose them. I thought they would go by when I took the curve, but they fooled me. They caught us climbing the hills. They slammed me down when I tried to shoot. Two men carried him off in my car; two more fixed me. They left just a few moments before you got here."

She began to draw the coat around her.

"Did you get a story from him, Madge?"

"Not a word. He could barely

stand, and then not without my help. How about some pants?"

The coat was big for her, but it didn't cover her bare legs. She still had socks and sport shoes.

"There's a couple of pairs down there in the bushes," I told her, "if you don't mind what they come off." I liked the way she was taking that close one. A couple of minutes—hell, thirty seconds more—and she would have been fried to a crisp. But it was a cinch we couldn't hang around there, not with the fire beginning to show up through the windows. And the machine-gun racket had been enough to call attention for miles around. I don't suppose we'd been there more than a minute and a half after we'd ducked out the window, but a lot can happen in that time.

"Why should I?" Madge asked. "I can't been seen like—"

She broke off. A heavy, thudding sound had come rolling over the still water of the bay and seemed a long while dying out. We jerked our heads that way and far off on the distant shore saw a point of bright flame leaping high into the air.

"That's the oil basin!" Madge gasped.

"The second blowup tonight," I told her. "Someone has got the hooks into J. R., plenty. Come on!"

I caught her hand and we started down the slope, but there were brambles among the bushes and Madge couldn't make it fast enough to suit me. So I swung her up in my arms and didn't set her down again until we stood by a motionless form, face downward, with a submachine gun beside it. I snapped on the flash, and Madge said: "I don't believe I want any pants."

"Don't be squeamish," I told her. "They'd fixed you for a hot take-off all right. Say—what did they do with your clothes, Madge?"

She slapped a bare thigh.

"I'm a fool. They rolled them up and took them along."

I grabbed her up again and ran most of the way down where they'd left their car. I poked in the flash and saw the roll in the back seat. I hooked it out with a long arm.

"Put them on outside," I told her; "then you won't muss what prints there are. I'm going for the coupé. Hustle!"

There was a wheel to change and that would take valuable time, but I couldn't leave J. R.'s car there for the police to find. I wanted them to find the two mugs just as they were, car and all, and if one was missing a pair of pants it would certainly complicate the story. I backed the coupé from the bushes, ran it on a rim up around the curve, where Madge hopped it. I kept on a piece before starting a quick job with the spare.

We got rolling again, fast. There were three places I wanted to go to —and to each one first. Things were piling up on J. R. I wasn't much worried then for Frank's life. Dead he was worth nothing to the babies in this game; alive, they could ask what they wanted and, if they didn't get it, throw Frank to the cops. With Madge and me out, it was a cinch. And it was a cinch, too, that as soon as the main guy heard about the two misses, he'd send some more lads to do it right. But I couldn't go into hiding.

"Madge," I said, "how about getting home and sticking there?" I explained why it seemed worth while.

"We've got to find Frank," she said.

"Say—didn't you hear anything they said? Didn't they talk at all?"

"Not so easy to remember, Dick.

They ripped off my clothes, tied me, taped my mouth and threw me against the wall. Yes, while they were spilling the oil and fixing that cap, they did talk a little. One said he hoped Stubby would have as much luck."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

"The other was doubtful about some man. He said things were fixed, right now, unless this man should learn too much and talk the way he always does. He said they'd better close his trap and be sure of it."

"Didn't you hear them call him anything?"

"That's what I'm trying to think of. I've got it—Sam. Hey, what's the matter?"

I eased my foot up from the pedal where I'd jammed it to the floor boards. Of course, there could be other Sams, but not the brother of a guy who'd been doing the funny things that I had an idea Lem'd been up to tonight. At least I was ready to put them on Lem when Madge sprung this, and it began to make sense. More than that, what Madge had remembered seemed to fit the character of a lad who'd spend a hundred bucks from fear that his brother might land in trouble. Anyway, it was hunch enough for me to go into a huddle with a one-eyed guy.

"They also said something about time clocks," Madge said, "but I don't know what the connection was."

I was only half listening. I spotted the first phone we came to, and I parked the coupé. Madge followed me inside. I called a useful friend who owed me a favor or two, cut him off when he tried to tell me something and gave it to him fast.

"Look, Lou—slip word into homicide that you heard a guy talking. He said that Stubby Mellor was seen close by the murder spot on Sorrento at the right time. The idea is to turn the heat on fast. 'By."

I hung up while he was yelling his head off, signed Madge into the booth and called J. R.'s number.

I gave him the news fast. He took it with a steady: "Yes, yes," that had me puzzled. I stopped a second and he cut in, in his quiet way of talking. I don't believe a hurricane would ever rattle J. R.

"What you expected has come through."

"Huh?" Then I had it. "You mean the hundred thousand dollars?"

"I think you can multiply that by fifty."

It took me a couple of seconds to reckon five million simoleons, and J. R. never exaggerated.

"It will come as a clean bill of sale," he said.

"Trace it?" I snapped.

"That is not necessary. The . . . er . . . gentleman is—"

There was a funny sound; then the phone was replaced gently.

I didn't waste time fooling with the operator. I tore out of there. Madge was in the car as soon as I. We didn't talk much as we burned the rest of the way. What was the use speculating?

CHAPTER III.

SNATCH!

There were dimmed lights on the lower floor as we skidded into the driveway. I always carried a key for the side door and I didn't fumble with the lock. In the big hallway I nearly fell over a figure on the rug. I snapped on some lights, turned back and knelt beside old Dan, J. R.'s butler. He'd been hit hard. Blood was streaked down one

side of his face; his eyes were closed, but he was breathing. Madge turned up beside me with a brandy flask, and I dived for the library. That was empty and I came back.

I got the old fellow on the sofa and between us we slipped a little of the neat liquor between his blue lips. It had been a glancing blow and to a younger man would have been no more than a knockout, but to old Dan it was just a dirty trick. While I was waiting for him to show signs of returning consciousness, Madge nodded over to the back of the hallway. Another figure was lying there and it wasn't moving. I shifted Dan's head to Madge's arm and went over.

Sims, the chauffeur-caretaker was out, all the way. He was dead, with a smashed skull! They'd given it to the younger man harder.

I went back to Dan. He was beginning to mumble. I set him upright and gave him another light swig; then he opened his eyes. I took his arm, with Madge on the other side, and half led him, half carried him to the library. The walk seemed to fully awaken him.

"Easy, now, Dan," I told him. "What happened?"

"Two men were waiting in the hall." He had to take it slow. "When they brought Mr. Hollister out, one of them struck Sims as he rushed in; the other hit me. That is all I remember."

"Was J. R. hurt? You saw him before you passed out."

"I . . . I don't think so, Mr. Richard. He looked . . . as always."

"He would. Was someone forcing him along?"

"Yes, but he wasn't resisting."

"What did the man look like?"

"Like a gentleman, I thought, although he surely didn't act like one." Damn it, the old fellow had that deliberate way of talking like J. R. "He was quite tall, well dressed, and—yes—he wore a small spike mus—"

One jump and I had the phone in my hand. And in a couple of seconds Lou Haines on the other end of the wire. He started cursing me, and I had to yell to stop him.

"Listen, Lou. Get down here to J. R.'s as quick as the Lord will let you. Your big chance. Carry on. You'll get the dope here. Remember, the butler called you when he couldn't reach me."

I hung up and turned to Madge.

"You got that Madge. Make Dan understand clearly. Tell Lou to get the commisioner to put out a quiet for J. R. No news—his life depends on it. Give him a description of the two thugs only; make it three. That's for the police. Motive: stick-up, robbery and a snatch. Tell Lou to stick here. You, too, but keep out of the way of the coppers."

I was busy while I was talking, pulling out drawers, scattering some papers and dropping a couple of bills on the floor.

"Can't I go with you, Dick?" Madge asked.

"Your big job is right here, Madge. This is dynamite and could hoist us all. Tell Lou to get all he can from Dan on the two mugs. Leave the other guy to me. Lou's story is that I went out of town early this evening on a case."

"Mr. Richard," Dan's weak voice stopped me at the door, "I heard the man say to Mr. Hollister: 'I can put you up high where you can see for yourself.' "

"All right, Dan. Now do everything just as Miss Carroll tells you. Luck, Madge."

I closed the door on her: "Careful, Dick."

I couldn't take a chance in the streets with the coupe; those bullets had hit about everything in the back of the car except the tank. It cost me a minute or so to get out the sport phaeton, but I made that up.

One-eyed Sam Smalley had given me an address. I hoped it wasn't a phony but I had to chance that. He had no listing in the phone book. It was a hunch of course, but whether it was a long one or a short one I had to see.

And it was one of those detached houses near the edge of town, something like the Sorrento bungalows but not built that way. Yeah, this was different. I parked some distance away and moved up for a look. There was a lot of shrubbery from the sidewalk in, so I slid back and took it from the side.

Using the shrubs, I got up near the corner without a whisper of my progress, when a car slid up to the gate. Maybe I should have hustled right up to the front door, but that thick shrubbery had given me a hunch. Now, it began to look as if I'd been wise. I ducked down to a knee for a look without a chance of being seen. I heard one set of steps alone coming up the walk. But my shrub was too thick, and it was only when the lad got close to the steps that I recognized him.

Yes—stick, swell clothes, spike mustache and all; it was Lem Smalley. I'd hit it right on the button. He skipped up the steps, and I heard the door close as I started to get up. But that was all right. I had him bagged, and it was only a case of going in and taking him. Or was it?

I was halfway up when a big lad loomed right up in arm's reach of me.

"Get 'em up and speak your piece fast," he growled, and he said it so low that only he and I could have heard it.

He crowded me and I gave back. I didn't say anything. It was dark there, but something familiar in that bulk and the low growling voice was working in my bean. I couldn't reach for my gun, not with his a foot from my guts; and for the same sufficient reason I hadn't tried for his jaw. We worked back that way until we were halfway along the side of the house. Then I had it.

"What are you doing in this lay, Dave?" I asked him, and I didn't yell it, either.

"Huh?" He stuck his beak forward and peered closer at me. "Dick Grand, huh? Well, that don't make no difference—not when a guy comes soft-footin' around here, shamus or no shamus. What do you want anyway?"

Dave Ross lowered his gun a little, but he didn't put it away. We were once on the same side of the fence, but maybe his job was different, now. Dave had been on the police force and had been a good man, too. But something went screwy on a job he was on, the commissioner was quick on the trigger—as commissioners sometimes are—and Dave got canned. Since, I'd heard, he'd gone in for private-detective work; they'd given him his license all right. Maybe that satisfied their consciences. But Dave swore he'd been two-timed to save a higher-up, and he carried a perpetual grouch.

"Look, Dave—you better tell me quick what your stand-in is here. I'm telling you it's hot."

Dave scratched his head, but not with his gun hand.

"I don't know what the hell it is to you, Grand." But I caught the little doubt in his tone.

"You never did ask for friends, Dave," I gave him fast, "but it's you



I had Frank over my shoulder. I was wondering how Vera could stay in that position with her chin almost touching the hilt of the knife.

I'm thinking of just now. I can't give you the whole low-down, but it's murder and a snatch, if you want to be sap enough to get tied in with that."

"They always said you were a square guy, Grand." Dave was speaking his thoughts out loud. Rather, he was whispering them. "Look—I'm a bodyguard for a guy. No stir ticket in that, I can see." He sort of got himself together. "Now who'd you come to see here, Grand? I'm on the job, now."

Sam Smalley," I gave him.

"Oh, that one-eyed nitwit."

"Did you see the guy who just came in?"

"Sure. He's the lad paying me."

"Yes—to watch out for gunmen. That doesn't mean the bulls, does it, Dave?"

"N-no. But, Grand—"

"I'll give you a tip, Dave, because I know you're wise enough not to spill it. Your lad is wanted in this man's town tonight on the biggest deal since you and I were pups."

"Well—huh! Say—you're no bull, Grand. I'll keep on my job till I see one anyway. You want one-eyed Sam. All right. His lay's on the other side of the house. You go round and look in on him. But I'm tellin' you, Grand, you ain't walkin' in on Lem unless you have a warrant."

And that was all right by me. Inside, was all I could ask for, and I knew Ross meant exactly what he said. That was the guy's trouble. No one ever could reason with him.

"One last thing, Dave," I told him. "You never heard a man say I'd lie. I'll go see Sam. You stay on your job—out here. But if Lem tries to leave, you stop him if it takes lead to do it."

"Aw, you go sell your papers," Dave growled, but there was no joy in his voice.

That had cost me plenty of time, but it couldn't have been helped. I guess I was lucky it hadn't been some guy other than Dave. I went around back of the house as fast as I could move without advertising it. Sneaking up the other side, I came to a small window and took a gander inside. I made out kind of a long room; then I saw a man's legs sticking out from an easy-chair. And that was al I could see; but the guy had on old worn shoes and familiar rumpled blue trousers. It looked as if he were taking it easy. I moved toward the front.

I just made the corner and was about to ease around another thick bush when low voices stopped me. Two guys were standing near the steps.

"You're crazy, Stub," one was saying, low. "I ain't sayin' it shouldn't be done, but a rod'll make a hell of a noise round here an' the boss'll clip your ears."

"There's a general alarm out for me, ain't they?" the other snarled, just as low. And that was Stubby Mellor speaking, the lad who'd tried his best to burn me down with a Tommy-gun. "An' when it catches up with me will be too late, won't it? That one-eyed rat put the finger on me. Only one who could've. You keep out of it if you wanta."

"I still say you're crazy," the first guy said, a little hurriedly. "Me, I gotta get some cigarettes." He turned toward the gate, but I wasn't interested in him. I watched Mellor creep softly up the steps. I slipped in between the thick bush and the house. I'd seen the faint glimmer of a window there which might give me a chance, and I wasn't following

Stubby Mellor into the dark of that hallway.

I made it. With the bush behind me I didn't think I'd be spotted. Besides, I'd heard the first lad walking down the sidewalk—not too slow, either. I looked inside. Sam Smalley was face to me, now, maybe fifteen feet away. I twisted my head and saw a door at my right and near the front. That would be where Stubby would have to come. I had my hand on the butt of my gun, just in case, but I'd noticed something about Sam and I didn't pull it then. His head was cocked to one side against the back of the chair, the black patch a little lower than his one eye. He looked as if he were sleeping, and maybe he was; but I thought I'd seen the lid of his one eye flicker before I'd looked for the door.

Now, as I glanced back at him, it was closed tight, and his big chest was heaving, slow and regular. His left arm lay limp on the arm of the big chair, his right had fallen down by his thigh. I looked back at the door. It had opened a crack; slowly, it moved wider. Stubby's mean mug showed. He stuck an eye around the edge, waited, seemed to like what he saw and moved all the way in. I switched to Sam. He hadn't changed an eyelash. Back to Mellor.

He'd taken his stand. The gun was already in his hand. There was too much I wanted from Sam to have him taken like this. I yanked my gun as I saw Mellor raising his for a sure aim. He was near enough in line with Sam now for me to cover both, and I paused. Sam's head was just where it had been. That one good eye was still closed tight. But —Sam's right hand came up fast, lined, and there was a little flash and a sharp snap!

I saw Stubby Mellor folding, and something—I don't know what—made me drop. Glass tinkled just where my head had been. That was all right. If Sam sensed Stubby Mellor there, he might have had the idea a pal was at the window. But I didn't stop to think that over.

Dave Ross moved around from the corner as I made the steps.

"All right, Dave," I told him low. "A guy just tried to get Sam. I'll take it. You stop his pal if he comes back. Stubby Mellor's through."

Stubby had conveniently left the door open. I peeked in through the crack of the jamb. Sam was sitting up now; his hand with the gun was resting on one stout knee.

"All right, Smalley," I said. "This is Grand." I waited a second longer until he tucked the gun away.

He grinned at me as I came in.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Grand," he said. "Mebbe you saw what happened. "Then his face changed. "I can hear awful well. I heard someone comin' along the side, and I hear this fellow comin' in the door. But I guess he couldn't see that I was peeking through my eyelashes all the time." And I guessed, too, that Stubby hadn't. I know that I hadn't, anyway. "Maybe it was you at the window. I'm awful sorry, Mr. Grand."

"All right, Sam," I told him. "I came to see your brother, Lem. He's right in the middle of that frame you were worried about."

All the good nature faded from Sam's face. I saw that he'd had a shave since he'd left me, and except for his clothes he didn't look quite so rough and unkempt as he had at the office.

"I thought I heard him come in a little while ago," Sam said.

"Yes—about ten minutes. I saw him."

"Well, I didn't want him to know about you, Mr. Grand. Lem don't live here," he went on, as if thinking it over, "but I put a room aside for him to use when he drops in—like now. He keeps it just the way he wants it. I don't never bother it. Is it bad enough, you think, for us to walk in on him?"

"If I don't talk to him within five minutes," I said, "he'll go in on a rap for murder." I didn't say that he would go in if I did talk to him.

"Well, now." Sam stood up. "Maybe then we gotta. He's a pretty quick-tempered fellow, Mr. Grand, and may not think you mean well."

I didn't say anything, but I appreciated the tip just the same. If Lem, with both eyes open, could shoot as well as Sam with only one, and that closed, then it was an idea to be ready.

"You come this way," Sam said and shuffled across the room toward a door near the rear. As I followed him, looking at his drooping shoulders, I was comparing the two brothers and thinking what a difference possibly the matter of education had made between the two. Maybe, I thought, it was Sam's affliction that had kept him down. Sam was fully as big as his brother, maybe a little heavier, or looked so in his loose, ill-fitting clothes. I judged Sam would have been as tall as Lem if he stood up straight and didn't carry those slumped shoulders which were so true to his character.

We stepped into a back hall. Sam crossed it and rapped on a door. There was no answer.

"That's funny," he said in a low tone. "Never knew Lem to go out again without speakin' to me at least. I didn't hear him go, did you?"

"No, I didn't." I was getting suddenly hot under the collar. "Go on in, Sam. We have to see him."

Sam, frowning, threw a glance toward the back, and I followed it to see a rear door. Then he turned the knob, and the door opened into a lighted room. I shoved in against his shoulder. I saw it was a square room, with shades drawn at the windows and a door leading to a closet—and that it was empty. The closet was, too; that is, Lem Smalley wasn't in it, although several suits of clothes were hanging there.

I took my head out of the closet and looked at Sam's worried face.

"Where could he go to?" I threw at him, as I started a rush for the door.

"I don't know. I think maybe I better—"

The shot stopped him—and me, too. It came from close beside the house but nearer the front than this room. And right on top of it came a whole bunch of shots. They sounded like a dozen but maybe there were only three or four. I guessed that was enough, and I knew it was when I lit out the front door and heard a motor making off. I skated around the corner and came upon Dave Ross lying near it. He wouldn't have to worry any more about what sort of a guy he was bodyguarding. But why Dave had been put out was something more than I could figure.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAP!

I did a double back to the front and saw Sam standing in the open doorway with the house all dark behind him.

"I never did know where Lem lives," he said, just as if there had been no interruption to our conversation. "But I think maybe if you're goin' to look for him, Mr. Grand, I better go along with you."

I thought so, too.

"You got a car?" Sam asked as we went out front.

"I had one," I growled. "Come on!"

I was hot. I'd had my hands practically on the key to the whole mess, and he'd slipped through. Dave would've done better if he'd listened to me; but he'd never listened to anyone. I couldn't figure who had put him out or why. Lem's doing it didn't make sense; but somebody going for Lem, as Stubby had for one-eyed Sam, might. That would place Dave doing his job right up to the end. I put it out of mind, or tried to. Dave made the sixth dead one I'd left behind that night. I knew I couldn't travel fast enough to keep out of the way long, once the flatfoot boys hit the trail.

"Where you thinkin' of lookin' for him?" Sam asked, reasonably enough, after I'd driven half a dozen blocks, blindly.

"What do you think, Sam?"

"Well, now, as I said, I ain't got no idea where Lem lives. I know that sounds funny, but as long as he puts in the money I ain't got no call to growl."

"Haven't you an idea in the world, Sam?" I snapped at him.

"Like I was goin' to say, Mr. Grand, the only place I can think of is where I suspect Lem might do some of his business. I don't know the street or the number, but I was there once an' I can take you to it."

"Business office?"

"Yeah."

"You think he'd be in an office this time of night?" and I threw plenty sarcasm into it.

"Maybe not, but it's the only place I know. It ain't so far anyway; right near the oil basin, I recollect."

And that did it.

Sam didn't know the streets by name but he pointed them out.

"I don't get into town very much,"

Sam apologized. "Guess you figure I'm kinder lazy, Mr. Grand."

"You can move fast enough when you have to," I told him, and he laughed. He didn't seem at all worried about brother Lemuel; not as much I was anyway.

"It's just round the corner on that last street," Sam said, and I slowed to park a short block away.

There was an end street ahead of us, and the high board fence of the oil basin. I knew exactly where we were, but I'd never paid any attention to the dinky five and six-story buildings fronting the fence. The entrance was over to the right a little way but we turned left. It hadn't seemed too cool to me but Sam had bundled into a big coat and he bulked large. He led the way into a narrow, poorly lighted entrance several numbers down from the corner.

I had glanced up as we turned in from the sidewalk. I hadn't seen any lighted office and didn't know whether this was a fool's errand or not. But it was the only try I knew of, and I thought we might at least get a lead if I could look things over in the place where Lem did some of his business.

I didn't see any elevator but Sam went on, turned a right-hand corner and stopped before what appeared to be a bank of two. He pressed a button and nothing happened. Then he squinted into the ground glass of one.

"Probably only one runnin'," he said, "an' looks like that one's in the basement. You wait here, Mr. Grand, and I'll get the janitor." He shuffled through a door at one side before I had torn my mind from something I'd begun to think about.

I waited a minute, maybe two; then I heard the elevator begin to shake down below. A door slid and banged and the old-fashioned hoist started to whine. I was listening to that and possibly it was why I didn't hear anything behind me until a guy spoke.

"Lookin' for something, buddy?" he asked.

I turned slowly around to the left and let my right hand sag down. Then I didn't move it any farther. Four lads were lined up just behind me and that made four guns pointed straight at my guts.

"Yes," I told them, "but nothing like this. I came to see a guy."

"Now, that's fine," the fellow who'd spoken said. "We'll take you right up to him."

The elevator door was open; but it was behind me, and I couldn't see how Sam was taking this, if he were aboard. I had a smart idea of jumping backward into the cage, getting around the corner of the door and doing a little gun work, myself. And I was tensed for it when a gun muzzle dug hard into my back and a new voice spoke.

"Good work, boys." It was a hoarse, rasping voice and I didn't like it; neither did I like the gun in my back or the whole damned business. But he was still talking. "I just knocked another guy out downstairs. He came pussyfootin' in on me. But he'll keep till you go down for him."

"Back in, Bill," the first lad growled. "We're comin' aboard."

That cage was just large enough for what they wanted and not an inch more. The two in the middle kept their guns on me, just out of reach, while the other two crowded in on each side. Bill shut the elevator door, and they took their time relieving me of everything worth lifting. They went through once, started again, then one gave me a swat on the jaw.

"Where your car keys, punk?" he snarled. "You won't want 'em any more."

I tried to give him one back, but I couldn't quite lift the guy hanging on my arm.

"If you haven't found them, they must be in the car," I told him. "You've taken everything but the lining." But I still had the keys. Force of old habit, from a long walk when I'd been frisked before. I had a little pocket on the inside of my trousers waistband. When I'd take the key out of the lock, I'd always stick it there without even thinking of it.

It must have taken them all of five minutes to do their frisking, and that small cage was getting steamed up with the six of us in there.

"All right, Bill," the tough mug said. "Let's go."

"How about the guy downstairs?" Bill asked with his hand on the control. "Want to run down an' get him?"

"You think he'll run away?"

"Run, hell! He won't walk for a month."

I couldn't get it; that is, whether the man, Bill, had known Sam. Then I thought about Stubby Mellor. But there'd been no names mentioned. Maybe we'd run into something else.

"Up," the guy said.

I've been on slow elevators, but this one seemed to take about ten minutes to make five or six floors. I got tired of counting and maybe I counted the same ones twice. And perhaps I was doing too much thinking. It didn't get me anything, except hot under the collar, which sometimes helps when things don't look so good. Then Bill started to unwind the control, and the old cage shook to a stop.

Two lads backed out before me and two came behind. We pushed across a little corridor into a well-



lighted, small room. No one said anything. We just stood there. I heard the old elevator wheezing downward.

CHAPTER V.

MEET THE BOSS!

Then it happened. A door opened quickly at one side, and I looked at Lem Smalley rubbing his hands and looking very pleased. I'd found him all right, but he was acting as if he'd found me and was very happy about it. Then I kept on looking at him. I was about opening my mouth to tell him to send one of his punks down to look for Brother Sam, and then for some reason I didn't.

"Ah," he said, "we are ready now. Excellent work, boys. It will pay in good dividends, I promise you that. But we mustn't keep our friends waiting longer by themselves."

Then I looked at him a little harder. His voice wasn't as deep as Sam's, but it was clearer than it had sounded to me on the street. Maybe that's what had me a little puzzled. He hadn't grinned then, but he was grinning now, and it made that dinky little mustache of his bob up and down.

He turned abruptly and led the way back through the door he'd come in. I led a gun that was in the small of my back. The door closed behind us and we were in a dusky room. I was prodded across that and followed Lem into another room where light came in from a big plate-glass window that seemed to take up most of one side. Against it, I made out two seated figures close together. Lem took a chair not too near them, making three in a row. I was held up behind them, with the four mugs ranging alongside. And Lem was speaking.

"It pleases me," he said, "to consider for the last time, my first proposition, J. R." I gave a little start, although I should have known it. "There is a clear, unbreakable case of murder against Frank; that is, I alone have it in my power to break it."

"And for that you want five million dollars." There wasn't a tremor in J. R.'s steady tone, but there was sarcasm. "Don't be absurd, Smalley. Miss Carroll has already told you Frank couldn't have done it. There is another witness, also."

I shifted my glance from J. R. to the figure beside him, and my eyes were getting more accustomed to the light. Madge! How in hell had they got her here.

Lem Smalley was chuckling.

"Since we have here both of the witnesses you have in mind," he said, "we'll count them out."

Madge twisted her head around quick at that, and from the cramped movement I knew she was lashed to her chair. J. R. was, too, I guessed. But Lem was talking on.

"I am not saying that Frank actually did it. I'm only stating that it can be proved that he did, by evidence I have ready to send in. They'll never get the real killer. He was shot a little while ago while trying to assassinate my brother. Do you want to hear about the evidence, J. R.?"

"Unnecessary," J. R. said curtly. "I wouldn't believe you anyway, Smalley."

"Very well," Lem Smalley said. "I'm rather glad of it. Then you believe only what you see, eh, Hollister?"

"Quite right—where you are concerned."

"Ah, yes. Well, I think I promised that I could put you up high where you could see for yourself."

Where had I heard that before? Yes; old Dan, the butler.

Lem Smalley turned in his chair and snapped on a lighter. Before holding it to the cigarette between his lips, he held it to look around. Perhaps it was his gesture to impress J. R. that he was secure from interruption.

"Kurtz," he clipped. "Outside. I'll signal you when," and one of his buddies left the room. A moment later I heard his faint steps climbing upward, then footfalls on the roof. "Over there, J. R."—I could see Smalley wave his hand—"you have a nice little accumulation of oil. You have had two explosions there tonight, and they haven't yet found the cause. And they won't. You won't believe it, of course, until you see it, but I give you my word that in three minutes I can have the whole works ablaze. Let's not talk of five millions; let's say a partnership."

"Smalley, you are wasting your time," J. R. said coldly. "I would prefer to be a pauper than to be associated with you, as I told you many years ago. I am quite unconcerned over what happens to me. Go ahead and do your stuff while you have time, Smalley. You will never get away from what you have already done tonight."

I don't know whether J. R. got the angle or not; but I knew that Madge and I would never be left alive to tell what we were hearing now. Perhaps J. R. did and knew that any weakening on his part would not help.

"Perhaps not to yourself, J. R.," Smalley said, "but let's see how you feel toward someone else. Suppose you keep your eyes on that big tank nearest us. The top, you will observe, is about on this level. And, of course, you know what it contains. Now watch!"

He leaned to one side and pressed a button. A moment later, a small but intense searchlight beam cut across the sky from somewhere off to our left—from where the man Kurtz had gone, I guessed. At first, it pointed upward at a sharp angle, then began to come down to an even level and sweep around. And for a short instant, it touched the top of the big tank opposite us before passing on, raising to the sky and going out. But that instant had been enough.

It showed clearly the figure of a man on the top of that tank. As the light struck him, he rose from a prone to a sitting position and stared around into the beam. I got it, and I couldn't see how J. R. could miss it. The man was Frank Hollister!

Not a sound came from J. R., but Madge Carroll let out a low, groaning gasp. Then she twisted her head quickly toward me and back again, and I knew she wanted me to be ready for something.

"We will proceed rapidly, now, J. R.," Smalley said, and his voice was hard. "I have another means of exploding that tank, but I prefer to give you a lesson in loyalty. You always banked on that, and I am going to show you what it is worth. I have here a rifle filled with tracer bullets, and, of course, you know their purpose is incendiary. With a pistol to his head, you will watch your trusted man, Grand, here light the torch for Frank—unless you have decided now on an agreement. This is my last word."

"It is useless, Smalley," J. R. said, and although his voice did not tremble, it sounded hopeless. "Nothing can save the boy, now. I don't know how you contrived to get him there but he can never get down alive. He

never could stand a height. Once he approaches the edge he will get dizzy and fall."

"Look! Look!" Madge suddenly cried. "He . . . he's going to try it! Oh—"

Whether the brief spot of light had shown him something, I do not know, but we all could see that Frank was standing up, moving slowly, staggering toward the rounded edge! "He's dizzy already!" Madge cried again.

"Just like his mother," Smalley said, with bitter sarcasm.

"Damn you!" J. R. spoke suddenly. "Don't you mention her name!"

Then Madge screamed again. Frank was close now and he was wabbling. I saw that much; I heard Madge cry out again and again. And I was aware, too, that the three men beside me were pressing a little forward not to miss the sight of their victim slipping on the rounded edge and falling, falling—

CHAPTER VI.

TARGET FOR TRACERS!

I had eased back. On tiptoes I stole through the doorway. I crossed the next room with Madge's piercing screams ringing in my ears. They were shut off abruptly, as if a hand had smothered them. I was out the door, into the little corridor and heading for the stairs I'd noticed when we'd come from the elevator. And if it had taken ten minutes to come up, it didn't take me more than ten seconds going down.

I heard the stamp of feet higher up, behind me; the thud as they raced down after me. They didn't shoot; they didn't get near enough to see me. If I thought at all in that mad plunge, I may have reasoned that the noise of shooting was the last thing Lem Smalley wanted just then. But one thing I did know: until they could stop me, I had stolen the show. With me free, not only Lem Smalley but his whole crew would have to scatter; and I had an idea the lads got that as quick as Lem.

I made the ground floor, skidded around the corner and was out the door. I kept close to the edge of the building until I was opposite the entrance, then bent low and cut across with all the speed left in me. That last stretch was the critical one. It would be a cinch for Lem's men to pick me off at forty feet while I stood at the gate trying to get into the refinery yard.

I looked ahead as I ran, and saw a face at the little gate. It was slanted upward, probably looking for that strange searchlight. Then something nipped my coat, with a blast not far behind me! But I kept my eyes on the gate and saw the face come down.

"Marty! Open!" I yelled and crossed the last dozen feet in a plunge. I guess I thought of a lot of things while I was in the air. Bullets were ripping into the wood just ahead of me. They'd missed me so far, but if I would have to lay there even for a couple of seconds they wouldn't miss again.

My fingers, with my arms way outstretched, touched wood as a splinter stung my face. My arms half buckled; then there was a little snap, as the bolt slipped, and I went through. I didn't stop. I scrambled up from the cinders and went on like a sprinter just starting. The job I'd come on was still ahead of me, and I guess I hadn't given it much thought. I didn't know what I was going to do, only that I wanted to get to that big tank fast.

I heard the door slam behind me

and a shot or two. That would be Marty, but it was his affair, now. There were a lot of men farther down the yard. I saw some of them turn and begin coming back my way, and I knew that some had come from the guardhouse beside the gate and were running after me. I got my direction for the tank, turned my head over a shoulder and yelled:

"They got J. R.—high building across street. Go after them!"

They yelled something back; there was a lot of yelling all around. The fellows ahead of me were running up, now, as if they wanted to head me off. They got near enough for me to see that some were plant men and others were in uniform. I made the bank and the outer rim of the tank and slid around to the little iron steps and guard rails that went up to join the inside tank. As I sprang, I saw a man draw his gun.

"Come down off there," he yelled.

I didn't stop clawing upward. I shouted the same message down at them, glanced over my shoulder and saw them staring, open mouthed.

"You damned fools!" I yelled again. "J. R.—prisoner—sixth floor. Get after 'em before they kill him!"

"He's gone nuts!" I heard one say.

"Where you going?" the flatfoot shouted.

I made the top of the outer rim and then yelled:

"After Frank! Don't stand there like a bunch of fools. J. R.'s tied up, across the street. Get a machine gun on that plate-glass window—top floor. If they start to shoot tracers, pour it into them!"

I swung over and grabbed the iron rungs that ran up the inner shell.

"Clean batty!" came up to me. "I

guess I better drop him." That was the flatfoot, with me only twenty, thirty feet above him, like a fly on a window pane. Then something happened to change his mind.

There was a big blast, not too far away! And when that was ringing in my ears, a peak of flame shot upward that made everything as light as day. Don't think I didn't want to slide down and run for it. I knew what a fire could do in these basins, with pipes leading from one tank to another and the whole works going all together. And I guess that it was the last thought that kept me going on my way toward the sky. If the whole thing blew there was no chance for any of us, and I might as well take it up there as on the ground.

I looked up once. It seemed a hell of a way to the top. I glanced down once, and I didn't want to look again. But I did see the men scattering every way, and some were beating it for the gate. Whether they were just lamming or had finally got my meaning I couldn't tell, and I couldn't do any more about it, now.

I looked off to the left and saw where the flames lit up the buildings over there, with the edge of a big plate glass just showing against the rim of my tank. It was still at an angle above me. I hadn't got that far, but I was crawling steadily, frantically. I saw a streak of white smoke stab toward me and miss me by an inch or a foot. It didn't make any difference which. Then I saw it might; that is, if they were satisfied to shoot their tracers at me as the only target.

The iron ladder I was crawling up was just far enough around the rim for me to be out of sight from the office windows. But if, in climbing, I swung out too far, I wasn't. I got that as a second tracer tried to search me out, and I flattened against the iron side. It was slower that way, but safer—unless they put their incendiaries straight into the tank. Why they hadn't done that before, I didn't know, and I tried not to think too much about it.

Then I got the idea they didn't dare to—that the blast, if that big tank let go, would wreck their building. It wasn't a very pleasant thought, as far as I was concerned, but it had its point and gave me an extra jog of steam. Then I looked the other way, off to the right and deep into the basin. That column of flame was shooting high into the sky, clouding now with thick black smoke. I tried to locate it; to see if that would give me any comfort. I saw that it was pretty well down the line toward the dock. But unless it was isolated, with all leads and shutoffs closed, that wouldn't mean anything, except in the matter of time.

I knew, anyway, as I'd known all along, that I had to hurry. Hell, I was pumping one hand over the other, one foot over the other, as fast as I could make them pull and push. I guessed there were a thousand of those rungs and I felt I'd climbed a mile. Still I had to go down again, if I were allowed to. But I was getting high, now, and tried to forget that I was muscle-spent, and my wind nothing but a gasp.

I looked up. I saw the curving top was only about twenty feet more. Then I saw the white line of a tracer just above that top, then another, as I kept my eyes up. Trying to pick off Frank; that was the game. Which meant that no one had come along to stop them. They were giving J. R. an eyeful. Maybe that thought of J. R. helped steady

me. It was plain, anyway, that the job was up to me—and to me alone, now. Loyalty? I don't know. Perhaps it was the thought that J. R. aways did a man's job, and this was one for me.

Then I was close to the curve, and I was looking that way. The first thing I saw was a pair of shoes, then the legs, and they were sliding down on me. I guess I jumped the last few rungs, and twisted a wrist inside one. All I know is that the jar, when Frank hit me coming down, tore the skin off that wrist. For a second I thought it had torn my arm out of the socket. Somehow, I held him and slammed him against the iron.

"Grab that ladder!" I yelled at him, and I felt I couldn't hold him much longer.

"I can't! I can't!" he wailed. "I'm slipping! I'm falling!"

"Get your legs across my shoulders and hold on to the rungs with your hands!" I don't as a rule go in for cursing, but I called him all the names I could think of. Maybe it helped.

Anyway, I got more weight than I thought I could take care of, as his legs got a scissors hold around my neck. Talk about a drowning man grabbing you. That's nothing to being a couple of hundred feet—or whatever it was—up in the air, and having your breath choked off. I scraped my nose against the iron, then butted my head back into his stomach. That gave me enough breath to yell at him again. There wasn't any time for conversation and I didn't have breath to spare, but I knew a couple more seconds of this and we'd both take the drop. I told him what a low-down, yellow gutless animal he was and if he didn't grab those rungs and ease the load I'd dump him.

"I'm dizzy," he whined. "Everything's going round and round!" But I did feel a little easing, got my wrist free and took the first step down.

"Don't look down, you damned fool!" I gave him. "Keep your eyes on those rungs, one by one. Count them. Now, one—two—"

There was a metallic whang! And it must have been close above Frank's head.

"What's that?" he yelled, and his legs scissored again.

"Not a damned thing that matters!" I yelled back. And that bullet, caroming off to go singing through the basin, didn't matter; but the next one might!

Rung by rung, down, down, down, with that weight on me growing like lead with every step until I didn't dare let go one hand till the next had its grip. And the strain was weakening my fingers. One slipped its hold, and for a second I thought we were going. After that, I cupped my palms around each rung, took a quick glance down and saw we were only halfway there. Frank wasn't helping it much. He'd grip hard with either hand, then let go; and his weight would jolt down on my shoulders. And that wasn't doing me any good.

A dozen times I was sure we wouldn't make it, except in a heap. One thing, I wasn't thinking any more about those tracers—not with the strain tearing my muscles from wrist to shoulder. I guess I didn't think much about anything, except that, each rung I made, I got to telling myself to make just one more.

I knew there was a terrific noise all around us—the roaring of flames, the clang of bells and whistles blowing, the plant siren shrieking and,

in any lull, the yelling of men. Once I thought I heard a machine gun.. I wasn't sure. Maybe it was the blood pounding in my head.

Then my feet hit the turnout to the outer rim. I paused for a second.

"Hold it, Frank," I told him. "Only about twenty feet more down the outer shell. You've got to make it yourself."

"I don't believe I can do it, Dick," he said weakly.

"Then wait here and I'll catch when you drop." I let go one hand, eased his leg off my neck until I set his foot on a rung and slipped below him. And with that weight off my shoulders, I felt as if my strength were coming back again. I risked a quick look off to the right, and I didn't like what I saw. Men were piling our way fast, and an engine was just behind them.

"Come on, Frank!" I yelled. "We have to hustle."

I went down fast, with my head up, watching for Frank to pile down on top of me. He didn't; he saw how near ground he was, and he made me hustle to keep his feet off my hands.

We made it and I swung him around toward the gate, trying to get us both into a run.

"All right, now that I'm on the ground, Dick," he said and sort of grinned.

I didn't waste breath to answer. I needed it.

We poured out through the gate with a lot of other fellows, and I noticed there was no one trying to get in. That end street was pretty clear, but it looked as though the whole town had come down to jam the streets leading into it. Some of the onlookers were taking a ducking where a line of engines were shooting back from the works and wetting down the opposite buildings. I took a glance up at the plate-glass window and from the reflection it looked to me as if there were holes in it. It was a cinch there was no one behind it, alive. And I almost stumbled over that one.

Madge was surely marked for an out! J. R., too. But I thought there'd be one more play in the game, and it didn't seem reasonable Lem would leave any dead bodies where he did some of his business. I was playing another hunch, and there was no time to lose.

I glanced back over my shoulder, and the hunch seemed stronger. Two-three million dollars' worth of crude and refined oil were going up in a blaze; there could be no doubt of that. The loss might cripple J. R. But he'd told Lem Smalley to do his stuff, and I guessed J. R. had known what he was saying. Lem's blackmail angle had failed also; and whether or not J. R. had any hope that Frank had pulled out, that threat had gone over his head as well. Just one thing more was left Lem Smalley, and if I'd learned anything about the guy by this time—and I thought I had—I knew he would try it. About Madge Carroll, I wasn't so certain, but I couldn't stop now—not with the whole town's attention on the biggest blaze in its history and giving Lem his chance to work undisturbed.

The street I wanted was roped off and some coppers were guarding it. But they were letting everyone through who was running away from the basin, and I don't think they even saw us as we ducked under and shouldered through the crowd.

"Where's dad?" Frank asked from just behind me. We had to make it single file there.

I nodded up over my shoulder. "Last I saw of him he was up there tied to a chair. So was Madge."

Frank grabbed my shoulder.

"Then where're you going, Dick? You wouldn't leave them?"

"I'm going to try to find them," I said. "Come along if you want to." I was still a little sore at Frank. That down trip from the top was still too fresh in my memory.

I turned the corner where I'd left the phaëton, and Frank was at my heels. The car was there, but nothing happened when I inserted the key and pressed the starter. I found out some guy had ripped a wire. But he'd been in a hurry and had left it dangling. I was just get-glance toward the corner. I saw my old pal, Captain Wright of homicide, shoving past toward the crowd in his police sedan. He had his head out the window to watch or I wouldn't have seen him. I ducked and gave him time to pass, jumped in, and started.

That fire was a blessing in one way; no one was paying any attention to lights and most everyone was coming toward me in the other lane. But if it helped me, I figured it had also helped Lem's getaway.

"Where you going?" Frank wanted to know again.

"Maybe I don't know the names of the streets," I growled at him, "but I can take you there."

And if you haven't known before, now you've guessed it. Yes, I was-ting it hooked up and happened to heading for Sam Smalley as fast as the phaëton could make it. Maybe my hunch was wrong and Smalley had another plan. But it was not

only the one place I knew, but it looked open and shut to me. For one thing, with me still in the open, there couldn't be any evidence of Lem Smalley left around; and I'd been too close to him to clean up before. Maybe Sam would stick and perhaps he could make the coppers believe he didn't know anything about his brother. That was their worry. Mine was that having to return to clean up meant going to the place where J. R. would get the works.

CHAPTER VII.
THE ALIBI FAILS.

I parked near where I had before—force of habit maybe. But I knew the way in from there, and I knew the place I wanted to hit first. My holster was light and my hands were empty. I wanted a gun bad. Frank insisted on following me, but I told him that if he made a whisper of sound I'd crown him and go home. I reached the corner of the house I wanted. Dave Ross had been pulled away somewhere, but I moved close in to the side, felt around with my foot and found it where he'd flung it from his hand when he'd been hit—his .38 Positive.

I moved around back, feeling that there were still four loaded cartridges in the cylinder. Frank tagged me, and that made me move a little slower. No lights showed in the windows of the room set apart for Lem, and I kept on all the way around till I came up to the front corner. Then I moved in behind the bush to the little window. I could hear voices all right, but something blocked a view. I backed out and shoved Frank back. I got his ear close.

"They've started the works, Frank," I whispered. "I'm going round back. If I can't get in and

you hear me pounding, you start a hell of a racket out here, but keep your head low or you'll stop lead!"

I still played Frank yellow; but I was wrong.

That back door was not only unlocked; it was off the latch. This crowd certainly felt safe, and I guess they had plenty of reason to think they were. And they were in a hurry. I went in with less noise than a mouse. It was dark, but I could hear the voice plainly now. And I didn't like what I was hearing! It was getting too close to the curtain.

I figured I was pretty close to the rear door, through which Sam had taken me to Lem's room, when light struck across the hallway up front. I saw Frank's figure outlined for a split second; then he plunged inside and I heard him yell to stop it. He'd fooled me but—

When I shoved through that back door, everyone was looking the other way, and I got the whole picture in one flash. J. R. was strapped to a chair, his gray head sagging and blood streaming down one cheek. A guy was standing just in front of him with a long-bladed knife, but his head was twisted toward Frank. Madge was in another chair, her body slumped against the straps, but whether she was dead or had fainted I didn't know. I didn't have time to find out just then. There were four other guys in there, too. One had his gun out, and he was just lining it down on Frank!

I let out a yell. Maybe I did it to give them a chance, but I don't think so; or maybe to save Frank for another second or two. But that doesn't make any difference. When Sam Smalley whirled around enough to let me see his black eye-patch I let him have it. I didn't shoot to kill. But I took care to put him out just the same, and I saw I'd done it.

Then I saw I had too much against me. I got the guy who started to throw the chiv, but I could see hands streaking for guns. I guess I was wondering which guy would get me first when the doors slammed in again and Captain Wright and a couple of his lads were taking over. I should've known his hawk eyes hadn't missed me.

He got things under control while I was untying J. R.; then he came over to me.

"Lou Haines," he said, and he eyed me hard, "said we were to get a well-dressed man with a small spiked mustache."

"You got him," I said.

I stepped over where Sam was squirming around but not too much, got down on my knee and yanked the patch off his right eye. That eye looked just as good as his left and was.

"So that's it, huh?" Wright wanted to know.

"That's it," I told him. "I knew it down in an office by the oil basin when I noticed a line across Lem's forehead just where this elastic fitted; but I couldn't do anything about it."

"What's the matter with the patch?" he asked as he saw me look it over, then stick it close to one eye and face the light.

"Nothing," I told him and passed it over. I'd seen a tiny pinhole in the middle of it that told me what I'd wanted to know when I didn't have anything more important on my mind. "Stick it right up to your eye, cap," I told him, "and you'll see how he got Stubby Mellor. I saw him shoot Mellor with his left eye closed, and now I know how."

Wright did the trick, then looked at me pretty soberly.

"You know, I suppose," he said, "we got to book you on a pretty serious charge. Maybe what you've done will help to clear you, but I can't promise."

I grinned at him.

"Look, cap," I said, "Miss Carroll seems to be all right, now. Let your boys take these guys in and we'll get J. R. down to his place and fix him up. There we'll give you the whole story even if you'll want to put a second degree on me. And that's a promise."

J. R. said he wasn't bothered so much about the oil loss; as a matter of fact, that was mostly the insurance companies' worry. But he felt pretty badly about the innocent victims of Samuel-Lemuel Smalley's outbreak of crime. Then he went on to give the rest of the story I hadn't told.

"I knew Smalley many years ago," he said, "when we were both young men. I was just starting in business, and I suppose I shall have to say we both were in love with the same girl. She married me. He seemed, then, a decent sort, and—perhaps feeling badly for him—I gave him an interest in my venture. The first years were hard, and although it was a gift he insisted that I buy him out. Which I did." J. R. paused to let the surgeon wind on some tape.

"He went into various things," J. R. resumed, "although I saw little of him and that too much, for he was seeking opportunity to make life uncomfortable for my wife. At that time, I remember, he was on the stage. He was a most clever quick-change artist. He would exit at one door and appear in the next as quite a different character, you know."

"Yes, I know," I growled. "And it was a pretty good alibi at that."

"I wonder if you know how good it really was," Captain Wright butted in. "I've found that he set up the one-eyed-brother gag for several years. I am inclined to think he might have got away with it. And that's one for you, Grand."

"I am not surprised," J. R. said. "I have been certain for years he was scheming revenge against me."

"Want to tell us what for?" the homicide man asked.

"There were two things. He attempted to blackmail Mrs. Hollister and then me. It was, of course, on what he had contrived, but it was nasty and I fear caused the break in my wife's health. She never recovered. I was younger, then, and I thrashed him within an inch of his life. The second was even harder for him to forgive—my success. He contended that I had cheated him out of a partnership, and he brought suit in various States, which were promptly thrown out of court as fast as presented."

"Did you recognize him when he put on the patch, J. R.?" I asked.

"Not until he spoke. Then I knew it was a disguise—after he had made away with me."

J. R. looked up at me while the doc turned to his bag for some more stuff.

"There is one thing not quite clear to me, Richard, and that is why Smalley should have come deliberately to your office before this all started."

"That's just the point," Captain Wright butted in before I could answer. "Let me see what I make of it, because it seemed to me one of the slickest crook tricks I've seen in some time. Of course, it was daring, but any guy that would set off an oil basin has the guts all right.

"Now, he was an actor and a quick-change artist. You see, he had set up the one-eyed character for years as an alibi. And when he had the patch on, he was careful never to do anything crooked that anyone could put a finger on. It was cast iron, and as long as we didn't know it was just one man, he was safe. We could hound him—as Sam—till hell froze trying to locate the brother, Lem, but we could never send him over for what we believed his brother had done."

"He was always very clever," J. R. said.

"I'll say the guy was clever," the homicide captain growled. "Of course, he had to be careful of prints and—as Lem—he probably used a paraffin-collodion mixture on his fingers or gloves. In what he had planned, he knew—as Lem—he would have to be right in the play. When the pinch came he would put on the patch and the dumb talk and let us whistle."

"But you haven't explained why he went so boldly to Dick," Madge said.

"I'm coming to that. He wanted to as a part of the play, and he had to. He'd set up the alibi around his place, but he had to establish it where it would do the most good, and he had another reason I'll come to later. He knew, of course, that Grand would be called into this sooner or later, and he saw to it that it was soon so he could keep his eye on him. Therefore, he wanted Grand to have the brother angle to begin with; that was one thing. Then he fixed it to catch Grand in a spot, and he did that, too. More than that, it was his insurance against something going wrong. I mean by that, as soon as he had put the goods on Frank, he wanted Grand and Miss Carroll wiped out. But, if his men missed up on Grand,

he knew that Grand had to come to him, see?"

"He played me for a sucker for a while," I admitted.

"Up to the last," Wright said, "he played you for more than that, my boy. As Sam, you would have been his most useful witness, and you would have believed you were swearing to the truth all the time, wouldn't you?"

"Sure, I would. But he got careless at the end."

"Maybe. But you never expected to leave that office alive, did you?"

"I got a lucky break."

"Sure. And he figured he was safe up to a certain time, but then might be too hurried to make his switch. He knew if Mr. Hollister wouldn't break, he and Miss Carroll would never testify against him. I guess he got careless, but he'd just lost out on three set-ups just because a certain man had more guts than he could possibly figure a man would have, so he naturally went haywire."

"What will you do with him?" J. R. asked.

"What won't we do to him? Three murder raps, two assaults with attempt to murder and all the casualties in the oil fire—"

"Listen," Frank interrupted. "Paste a trick mustache on that chap and he'd be the one who held a gun on me at Vera Carlton's while a tough poured a drink into me. And before I went under, I know I saw one of them drive a knife into her breast."

"Tell me, J. R.," I asked. "They sent some tracers buzzing pretty close. Why didn't they sink one into the tank?"

J. R. turned his head and took a long look at his son.

"I believe they intended to," he said finally. "I told them what would happen to them if they did, but perhaps they didn't believe me. We couldn't see you, Richard, but

we did see Frank sliding off the edge, and I presume they considered blowing the tank unnecessary. That was a bad moment for me," he added, "but perhaps it helped me—a little later," and that's all the complaint he made of what they'd done on him with a knife.

Captain Wright listened to Frank teling how he'd been sneaked into the basin while the explosion had drawn the men to the other end, then bound and with his mouth taped, had been drawn to the top by a couple of men who'd climbed up. He'd worked the rope off and had just torn the tape from his mouth when the searchlight touched him. The homicide chief looked me over.

Then he went out without taking me along; so I wasn't worried so much. The captain was a good scout and a real pal; he'd known me through more than one mess. After he'd left and Frank had gone off with Madge, J. R. turned to me.

"Richard, I have a place for you in the organization. It will carry a title and I expect about double the salary you are making, now, and you will have the opportunity to learn the oil business."

I may be a funny guy but I thought what I already knew about oil would last me quite a while. I didn't tell that to J. R. though.

THE STORY TRAIL

Continued from page 6

polite for him to lie down while company is present, or because he cares a damn about his feelings, but because the gent unconscious on the floor is unable to go on. He has suffered concussion of the brain, and is physically incapacitated for the next twenty-four hours or so.

"How different with a pulp hero. In this same issue which contained your sermon, one hero was bopped unconscious three times. He should not have been bopped the third time for after the second time he was dead. Or maybe he did not have any brain to be concussed—or maybe the author—or maybe the—well—guess."

Now, just who is right in this case is something else again. This point, too, comes up very often in discussions about stories. It seems that the detectives and police officers go through the most unbelievable difficulties without serious injury so often, that readers may get tired of it. Yet, we know from personal contact with detectives—and we know hundreds of them in this city as well as other cities—that a great many of their experiences are unbelievable. Even allowing for a certain amount of trimmings added to experiences of the past, their stories are still far above anything we would dare to print as fiction. It may be pretty hard for you to believe this, but if any one of you know a detective or police officer well enough to have him let his hair down, he will be able to give you more than one experience from which he, himself, doesn't know how he escaped unhurt.

However, the question of just how much a man can take without passing out; and how long he remains out when he does pass out; is something else again. We feel that Mr. Robertson is wrong in claiming that any fighter who is knocked out takes twenty-four hours to recover. If he has suffered *concussion of the brain,* it undoubtedly will take him a day or so to get back to normal, but a very small proportion of knock-outs, in the ring or elsewhere, are cases of concussion. In our personal experience, we have twice "passed out"; once in a prankish wrestling match when the other person got a strangle hold on our neck, and forgot to let go. All we remember was an attempt for breath, and then some water in the face; but no other ill effects. In fact, the wresttling match went on right away. The second time was a crack on the head by a baseball bat, we being the catcher in a sandlot team, and the ambitious batter swinging around a bit too much. Again, it was matter of a few minutes, and outside of a somewhat light feeling in the head, nothing else seemed to be wrong. (The fact that we grew up to be an editor of a detective-story magazine might be terrible evidence to the contrary!). Also, most of those fighters who are "knocked out" in the ring, turn up in a night club an hour later, and seem to be having a very good time, at that.

On that score, we think it is only fair to say that a hero, or any character, knocked unconscious does not suffer a brain concussion; and such character, therefore, can get up and keep on battling. We think doctors will agree with this statement—although most doctors are like lawyers; they give you no statement without two-dozen ifs and buts concerning it. However, if any of you have had experiences or want to take part in this discussion, why not write us? There's nothing like

being fair and square about things and giving all angles to the question. Also, although we seem to be arguing with Mr. Robertson here, we want to assure him in these columns, as we've already done by personal letter, that we welcome criticism as well as praise, and appreciate every letter we get. That's invitation enough, isn't it?

Before we run out of space here, we want to tell you about "Homicide Johnny," which is our featured complete novel in the next issue. "Homicide Johnny" is by Steve Fisher, who has appeared in our magazines many times, and who, you can depend upon it, always gives you a great story. This is one of the first yarns that Fisher has turned out since his return from Hollywood, where he spent a year working on pictures. Among others, the technicolor picture "Typhoon" was his work. Fisher's work appears in practically every good magazine on the stands, and right about the time this story of his appears in Clues you'll be seeing more of his work in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *American Magazine*, and others, all of whom have bought stories from him. Incidentally, Fisher had quite an experience soon after he completed this story. While his wife was in the hospital bringing in Michael, the third addition to the Fisher family, Steve Fisher himself had a sudden appendicitis attack—so both Mr. and Mrs. had a hospital sojourn together! As Fisher says, it was quite an experience, but one not to be recommended.

There'll be another Fisher yarn here soon after "Homicide Johnny."

Other stories in our next issue will include a really fine novelette by Charles Spain Verral. Verral does not often appear in these columns, but when he does turn out a story,

it's a really good one. The title of his novelette is "The Man Who Came to Murder," which, we think, is one swell title for a dandy yarn.

Race Williams, the lead character in the novel "Victim For Vengeance," which starts on Page 9 of this issue, will be one of our best-liked characters if you give him half a chance. Race Williams is known the world over, having appeared in many magazine stories and books, and Carroll John Daly, the author of the novel, is one of the best of mystery writers. We know you'll enjoy this novel immensely, so you better turn to it right now.

We have, from time to time, given you most unusual stories without hesitation, and found that you liked this "pepper" in with your diet of good, sound detective fiction. In this issue, we give you "Marksman," a short story by William Campbell Gault, a brand-new writer to these pages. We don't mind saying that this is not a detective story, and that, according to standard rules and regulations, it has no place in a detective magazine. However, it is one of the best short stories that we have read in ages, and the fact that it has no detective in it does not, in our opinion, keep it from being a detective story in its true sense, if not in physical properties.

You may not agree with us entirely, but if you turn to Page 71 right now and start "Marksman," we know that you won't stop until you've finished. And when you've finished, you'll have felt every emotion, every fear and hope of the hero of the story. You will, we feel, add that it is a story that is worth reading more than once. You will want to pass it on to other people, and have them read it. And, above all, you will wonder whether, if you were in that position, you would have acted the same way.

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"Speed's the thing in aquaplaning," says Florence Holliss, "but in a cigarette the fun and the *extras* go with slower burning...with Camels."



A THRILL in every wave—a breath-taking bounce that says, *hang on or take your ducking!* Florence Holliss, above, likes the fast pace in sports. But in cigarettes, she prefers the slower-burning brand . . . Camels.



"THE FASTER THE PACE, the more the fun," says Florence Holliss, above. That goes for all her favorite sports . . . aquaplaning, tennis, riding. But she likes her smoking *slow.* "I always smoke Camels," Florence says. "They burn slower and make smoking so much more enjoyable. Camels are extra mild and extra cool—and they have such a welcome flavor." Make Camels your cigarette and enjoy *extra pleasure* and *extra smoking* (see right).

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